

A TIME TO LAUGH

By the same author

Robert Blatchford : Portrait of an Englishman
Portrait of England

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A TIME TO LAUGH



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TO
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I

EL MIRALAI MASTERSON BEY, CALLED THE ELEPHANT Strangler, came to Laweyn in the cool of the evening, having been closed up a tree by a lion. The tree was prickly.

But for the lion, Masterson would have ignored Laweyn. With much chasing of, or being chased by, wild animals, he combined a little recruiting for the Buna Service Corps of which he was commandant, thus meriting hard-living allowance appropriate to his rank.

Masterson, who ranked only as a colonel in the British Army, from which he was seconded, could not forget that his Bunawi title of miralai meant literally a prince. He never failed to remind new British officers that, when they joined the Buna Defence Force, they ceased to be prosaic subalterns, captains, majors, and became binbashia, commanders of a thousand head. He despised them because, in the unromantic way of Surbiton, Warrington and other places of their origin, they mumbled among themselves that they would rather remain subalterns, captains, majors, and serve where there were fewer flies. In any event, commanders of a thousand head or no, they still commanded platoons or companies in the Buna Service Corps, and drew meagre British pay.

The Bunawi of Masterson's immediate retinue, however, a veteran yuzbashi and a bash-shawish who had won the Distinguished Conduct Medal at Keren,

impressed themselves on him as having a keener sense of tradition. Impossible to think of the yuzbashi as merely a captain, the bash-shawish as a company sergeant-major, for, while the British officers reluctantly called him 'sir', they understood that he was a prince, and acclaimed him frequently as 'Excellency'.

Unfortunately, they, and half the Service Corps band in full regimentals were now, God willing, awaiting him at El Hillal, twenty miles away. El Hillal was a metropolis of eight hundred people, some of whom might be stimulated to patriotic fervour by the band, a little anti-Italian propaganda, the yuzbashi's tales of the bash-shawish's heroism, at Keren, and free beer. Laweyn's thin y or so thatched huts, squatting like mushrooms among the rocks and thornbushes of the enfolding hills, looked incapable of stimulation by anything.

The Elephant Strangler, however, was a determined man as well as a prince, and he did his best. He stood at the hill foot, among the domestic confusion of broken cooking pots, flails and spears, blew a preliminary blast through his thick moustache, and bellowed.

One or two old women stuck out scrawny necks almost indistinguishable from those of the hens which shared their huts, and retreated cackling. The evening breeze rattled jawbones of animals, each marking a rare and splendid meat feast, on their gibbet beside the chief's group of huts. The village, rising tier on tier in the grey-green shadow of the hill, made no other sign. The Elephant Strangler tripped over the stone-ringed circle of a threshing floor, fell into a manure heap, and bellowed more loudly.

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Abu Zed, chief of the villages of Laweyn, Ragii and Podi,

hereditary keeper of the farming magic, confidante of the spirit which went by the name of The Whole World, was presiding over the start of the limestone race on the sunlit side of the hill. He heard the bellowing through a benevolent haze of beer laced with smuggled brandy, and sent to see what it was.

Abu Zed, known also as Abu Butan, Father of the Stomachs, was six feet tall. His skull cap, embroidered in a significant pattern of red, blue and white recalling his friendship with spirits, perched jocularly over one glittering eye. His white galabich, a nightgown-like garment which he alone wore of the capering multitude, cascaded imposingly over the falls of his belly. About him leapt the young men, shields white-painted, cudgels tasselled with strands of goat-hair dyed the blue and scarlet of a plentiful harvest.

'Good! Good! Good!' thundered Abu Butan from the depths of all his stomachs as the tasselled cudgels scored purple weals on bare, rippling shoulders. 'One more! And one more! And another to make him a man. How does it feel to be nearly a man, Tula?'

Tula grinned proudly. He was Abu Butan's third surviving son, and his eldest brother, Kattei, was beating him for the last time with fraternal love.

'Very sore,' he said. But he carefully counted the strokes. After the race he would be a senior, unbeatable, no longer a fag, but entitled in his turn to exact service from juniors when he met them on the path to the cattle camp; and in three years he would be Father of the Boys like Kattei, allowed to give exactly as many blows as he had himself suffered in his novitiate.

Abu Butan beamed fondly upon them. They dripped with butter, as a chief's sons should, standing out easily among the shifting, shrieking, light-hearted crowd of

twenty or thirty young men from Laweyn and the kindred villages assembled for the race.

Weeks ago they had started collecting beer and food for the feast. Abu Butan was a rich man, farming five acres and owning goats uncountable; that is, more than twenty-five. He had thrown open his granary, where the remainder grain was already fermenting agreeably for beer-making, and had promised a dozen goats. Others followed his example, for the hoarding of wealth is distasteful to the spirits. The spirit of The Whole World itself had appeared to Abu Butan in a dream, powerfully disguised as a retired presbyterian District Commissioner named Mackenzie, who had once hanged several of Abu Butan's relatives for shooting policemen during the troubles, and if suspicion had been evidence, would have hanged Abu Butan himself. Mackenzie, omniscient, omnipotent, had assured his devoted servant that a race of unprecedented excitement would be followed by a feast of intoxicating splendour. He had told Abu Butan where Kattoi might get a shot at a giraffe when the game warden was not looking. He had not, it is true, said anything about a visitor; but Mackenzie was always one for surprises.

There was a jingle of bells in the crowd, and storm-clouds lowered upon Abu Butan's craggy face. His son Gadein, second survivor of the twenty or so he had fathered, timidly approached.

Gadein had a face like an inverted triangle, wide forehead and high cheekbones sloping down to a narrow, pointed chin. He wore a monkey tooth through the lobe of his right ear, an iron ring in his nose, and round his waist a belt of lizard skins in which bells gaily tinkled. His body was splendid with red and white spots, his hair ochred and buttered into imposing ridges. Yet he looked

anything but a senior, and a chief's son at that. Kattei was gravely handsome, with a conscious dignity. Tula danced through life on dainty gazelle's feet, with a sharp tongue and a cheeky smile to turn its edge a little. Gadein had the angular, hesitant uncouthness of a trapped giraffe. The knees stood out like knots of rye grass on his thin legs, and he leaned apologetically forward as if aware that he was only too likely to trip over something.

'Here comes the lunatic!' the young men roared delightedly as Gadein pushed half-heartedly through the mob. They thrust out a cudgel here, a shield there, to trip and jostle him, at which he only grinned, for he was used to and loved a joke. The smile on his thick lips, reflected also in the almond-shaped brown eyes beneath their long lashes, was singularly sweet. His father thought it abysmally oafish.

For Gadein, though blessed with the farm's magic, had not been content to plant the old grain in the old way. He had used on his father's out-farm some new stuff, said to be protected by the spirits against locusts. Locusts did not eat the crop; goats did. It was Gadein, too, who had sat up all night outside the thorn hedge of the cattle camp in the plain, stroking the nose of a restless steer, and had found at first light that it was a lion's nose he was soothing. The lion, until lulled to sleep by Gadein, had been dining off a young milch cow. Fortunately the cow was Gadein's, so everybody (except Abu Butan) had been able to enjoy the joke, and Tula made up a song about it, which was popular on dance nights in the novices' club hut.

As a senior, Gadein had been outwrestled by every junior in the village. When Abu Butan, pointing his question with two or three strokes of the cudgel, had demanded to know why, Gadein creased his forehead

ever more deeply in the effort to understand a puzzling world, and drawled in his deep, slow voice, 'But they're all so little!'

'By God,' his father had answered simply, though with profound feeling, 'I think you have indeed eaten the bread of Khamyra.'

The people of Khamyra, like the people of Laweyn, have the farming magic, and when these two strong magics are mixed in one stomach, the result is obviously too much for the human brain.

Abu Butan, knowing that only useless old women were left in the village, had thought it sufficient to send Gadein to discover what wild beast was bellowing there. When he saw that the beast was a large Englishman in a torn bush-jacket, carving a little lane of silence in the cawing crowd, he wished he had sent Kattei instead. Giraffe were rare now, and the game warden fined those who shot them three cows, 'even four cows.' The odour of roasting giraffe suddenly seemed to Abu Butan to fill the sky. There was, moreover, the little matter of smuggled brandy, for which he had given five clips of illicit rifle ammunition smuggled by routes from Habashi country which it would be inconvenient to have investigated. There were always several such reasons why Abu Butan paid a clerk to inform him of the District Commissioner's movements.

Abu Butan dropped the butt of his broad-bladed spear heavily on Gadein's toe, and flung out his arms in welcome to the Englishman, overbalancing only a little, for he held his drink well.

'My lord,' he said, with the transparently honest smile which had endeared him to every District Commissioner except Mackenzie, 'greeting and salutation. May your night be happy.'

He was relieved to see that the stranger wore the three

stars and crown of an army officer, most of whom had minds of laudable innocence and purity.

'Peace be upon you,' grunted Masterson. He was in a bad temper, he needed a drink, and he was conscious that he smelt. Also he thought ceremonial greetings tedious and unnecessary. A simple soldier's salute had always been enough for him. But these fellows expected to trot out the whole rigmarole, and if one didn't humour them, the politicals made trouble.

'God be praised for your safety,' said Abu Butan. 'On your mother be peace. On your father be peace. May God grant all your years to be fruitful.' He had never seen the fellow before, and wished never to see him again; but greetings gave one time to think.

'My lord,' Abu Butan said tentatively, when he had exhausted the civilities, 'we are honoured to have you with us at this festival. Did they perhaps tell you in El Hillal about the race?'

'I had a little accident,' Masterson replied testily. It had been a very small lion, and he had missed twice.

'My lord!' said Abu Butan with a tremor of deep emotion. 'But now you shall bless your little accident and see the race. Not many Englishmen have seen it, it is most exciting. Three years ago a boy was killed.'

'I don't want to see whatever it is,' Masterson said. 'You must give me a bed, and a guide to El Hillal in the morning.'

But Abu Butan was not listening. It was best, he thought, to hustle the fellow along so that he had no time to investigate things. Mackenzie always used to sniff about in unexpected places, discovering the inconvenient; but Mackenzie was the friend of spirits, and not a proper Englishman. The best of them were very easily brow-beaten.

Abu Butāh leapt forward, therefore, raising gout-swollen hands above his massive head, and at the signal the Fathers of the Boys, each trying to outyell his fellows, began officiously to beat novices and seniors into some kind of line. These were the competitors. Behind them pressed all who could walk from the three villages which recognised Abu Britan as their spiritual head, seventy or eighty men, women and shrieking children, shouting advice, encouragement or abuse.

Against the dark background of the hill, saffron-tipped, spectators and competitors formed a moving frieze of black and white; round shields whitened, supple, dancing limbs with the rich bloom of a Victoria plum. From the foot of the hill the plain stretched away illimitably, scorched to harsh tones of ochre and raw umber by the now gentle sun. Five miles off, stereoscopically clear in the golden light, a white scar stood out, upon a hill sharply rounded like a girl's breast.

'Lion, Leopard, giraffe, aeroplane,' gabbled Abu Butan. 'The Whole World with you, The Whole World see you, spirits of The Whole World, pride of lion, claw of leopard, giraffe fleetness and wrath of aeroplane be with you. This is the sign.'

An elder with the fierce, consequential face of a baboon, handed to him the Remington rifle, pillage of a forgotten war, which was Laweyn's pride.

For a moment's stillness the vast aureate bowl of the plain seemed to hold them helpless as in a dream. Then a shot shattered the bow, dogs fled howling, a hare popped up suspicious ears three hundred yards away, and, as the young men leapt proudly into their stride, ran before them with increasing panic. The onlookers surged forward, whooping on hare and runners. Mastersqu surged forward too, willy-nilly.

'When the young men reach the hill Tya,' Abu Butan panted, magnificently breasting the tide beside Masterson, 'they must await my arrival. I am, you see, the representative of the spirit. With my spear I break away the first clod of limestone. Then they must fight until each has a piece of limestone with which to paint himself. It was thus the boy was killed. He was little and foolish, and the others trampled him.' He prodded three elderly women out of the way with his spear. 'The race is not often as exciting,' he added apologetically.

Masterson nodded, suddenly interested. He had recollected that he was, among other things, on a recruiting mission.

'Your young men seem splendidly healthy,' he said with a ponderous significance.

'The men of Laweyn are the bravest, the most daring fighters.' Abu Butan dropped quickly into the exalted whine of the ballad singer. 'The men of Khamyra are cowards and fools. In the time of my father and my father's father, further back in time than the mind can reach, the men of Laweyn, peace-loving and righteous, fought off the thieves and cowards of Khamyra who would take their goats. We raided Khamyra and we took their goats.' Exaltation ceased, and he became complacently conversational. 'You see my son Tula, he is a fine boy, it is he who has just overtaken and killed the hare. My son Kattei is a splendid man also. That is Kattei, whipping up the stupid fellow there, who has stumbled and fallen.'

He omitted to mention that the stupid fellow was his son Gadein. In moments of excitement, indeed, he managed to forget it.

Masterson looked with renewed interest. Soldiers should above all be inured to hardship. A man who could

stand the beating the stupid fellow was getting would stand anything. And Kattei, now. An ideal type, with a bit of discipline of course, for an N.C.O.

The pace became hotter, spectators and runners struggled in a dark crocodile across the plain. At the front ran the strongest seniors, who by tomorrow would have graduated as Fathers of the Boys, entitled to carry cudgels and use them for the good of the young. Conscious of this, they loped with long, easy strides, seeking to look as if they were not really trying, but glancing occasionally over their shoulders to ensure that they were a proper distance ahead of the leading novice. Behind them came a knot of half a dozen runners, weakling seniors and outstanding novices mixed up together. Tula was with this group, running well within himself, reserving his strength for the serious business of the evening, the race home.

'It is then you will see the excitement,' explained Abu Butan, puffing richly. 'The young boys like Tula will try to catch the seniors, and castrate them.'

'I beg your pardon?' Masterson was conscious that his Arabic often failed him at critical moments.

'Oh, it is not real, not like the old days,' replied Abu Butan, torn between regret and desire to assure the Englishman of Laweyn's present law-abidingness. In his youth few came to manhood without at least having shot a policeman. Now, they just won a sheepskin for wrestling, even outstanding boys like Kattei.

'It is only what we call castration,' he continued. 'The juniors will try to take the seniors' bells. That is the sign of manhood. It is terrible to lose your manhood. I had a cousin who was castrated thus. No one would sell him a wife in these villages, so he had to go many miles and pay a great bride-price. Then he had no wealth

and had to become a policeman, and was shot in the troubles.'

Abu Butan sighed heavily.

'Poor fellow,' said Masterson uncomfortably. He did not wish to dwell on such disadvantages of government service.

'Oh, no. He was stupid, he deserved it,' said Abu Butan. 'But they hanged my brother for shooting him. That was very sad.'

The leaders had reached the quarry now. They chose positions of advantage from which they might fight their way through to the limestone, then lay utterly relaxed until further effort was required, while the novices in their charge pantingly rallied about them. Tula was nominally in Gadein's group, but as both arrived together, Tula did the selecting.

Abu Butan came, as was proper, well, behind the slowest runner, but ahead of the band, armed with three gourd trumpets and a cow's horn, which led the remaining spectators. Abu Butan's galabich was kilted above the knee, his shaven head dripped with sweat. Masterson, striding in attendance, lacked breath, but Abu Butan's sharp tongue was never still, chastising a laggard, or with choice obscenities praising one who had run well.

'Gadein, I shall have to train a leopard to run behind you and teach you what your legs are for,' he thundered, his voice taking on the rough edge with which he habitually lashed his second son.

Sarcasm, abuse, beatings, unlike passed Gadein in, for however willingly he tried to meet the often conflicting demands of a bewildering world, he seemed inevitably to attract one or the other. Indeed, he had attracted them before he was born. With premature eagerness he had leapt in his mother's womb; and Abu Butan, groaning

majestically to assure the spirits that he too shared in the agony of birth, dowsed the fire, fasted, and took to his bed. The baby delayed its entrance for a fortnight. Abu Butan rose wrathfully and began interfering as usual in village affairs, and the baby popped out with such suddenness that Abu Butan scarcely had time to raise a groan to propitiate the spirits. Since that was so from the beginning, Gadein thought it as foolish to waste energy defying the spirits' malevolence as to shake his fist at thunderstorms.

He chuckled delightedly at Abu Butan's abuse, doubling up, rubbing his belly, rolling over and over on the ground, indulging the vast taste for laughter which was dearer to him than drink. Abu Butan looked on with disgust.

'A lion would be better than a leopard, father,' Tula said softly; and began to sing his Lullaby of Gadein and the Lion:

'You are sleepy, poor thing,' said Gadein. 'Come and rest your tired head on my foot.'

'You are sleepy, poor thing,' said Gadein. 'Come and rest your tired head on my knee.' "

The cow's horn and the trumpets, tiring of patriotic airs, joined in lustily, as did everybody else. Masterson, who had a sound instinct for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, was encouraged by the merry-making to broach his object.

'Have any of your splendid young men ever thought of joining the army?' he shouted above the uproar.

Abu Butan leapt as if Mackenzie had appeared in person.

'You are sleepy, poor thing,' said Gadein. 'Come and rest your tired head on my thigh.'

thundered the chorus, working zestfully towards the root of the joke.

'I can't hear anything you say,' gabbled Abu Butan with great presence of mind. 'Tula, stop it! Kattai, what do these pigs think they're doing? This is the limestone race, not a novices' dance night.'

He raged into action with his spear. Kattai's handsome face set in an expression of officious sternness as he and the other Fathers went to work. In the resulting pandemonium Abu Butan was happily able to hear even less.

Glancing distastefully at Masterson, he strode towards the white stone, his galabieh bellying like a lateen sail. Facing with reverently bowed head the home hill of his clan, he plunged his spear into the rock, levered off a clod, and hurled it viciously at the nearest face.

With a ripple of muscle beneath velvet skin the seniors swept forward, jostling, clawing, punching, while the little boys hung with batlike squeaks upon the flanks of the scrum, biting unwarily out-thrust limbs. The seniors gouged more lumps from the rock, out-fought contenders for possession and called their juniors about them with impassioned cries. 'Leopard! Leopard! To me, leopard!' 'Here, lion! Lion, quickly, on the left!' The juniors caught the precious lumps thrown to them, defended them valiantly in turn, and, like sparrows gulping a crust before rivals can interfere, daubed temples, chests and backs with the patina of purity pleasing to the spirits. Black gave way imperceptibly to white, chased with the crimson laurel of honourable wounds.

Masterson was a man impenetrably armoured in single-mindedness of purpose.

'It reminds me very much of a game we play in England,' he remarked, forcing his way to Abu Butan's side.

'This is not a game but a religious ceremony,' replied Abu Butan coldly, dodging to place a guard of scrimmagers between himself and this appalling Englishman.

'Rugby ' football,' continued Masterson, swerving astirritly, 'is thought to be an excellent training for army life. It hardens a man up. Now your young men, strong as they are, would soon show their superiority to the soft fellows we're getting from the towns. Your son Kettei, for instance, would quickly find himself with an N.C.O.'s pay.'

'It is quite impossible for a chief's son to be a soldier.'

'Some of the others, then. You don't want,' said Masterson, remembering the speech full of local allusions which his yuzbasni had prepared for him, 'Mussolini to come and steal your goats and your wives. And I think I should tell you that it's my duty to report to government on the patriotism, or otherwise, of the chiefs I deal with. I shall certainly speak to your District Commissioner when I get to El Hillal.'

Oh, Mackenzie, spirit of The Whole World! In the old days, before Mackenzie came, this importunate stranger would never have reached El Hillal alive. What did Mackenzie do to help, where was he at this moment? Probably smiling, tight-lipped at another of his little surprises, thought Abu Butan bitterly.

Limp as a windless sail, he watched the young men, now thoroughly whitewashed, racing away from the sunset, spurning the golden dust with flying feet. Oh, beautiful young men, adepts with cudgel and at following forbidden spoor, that they should be snatched away in the pride of manhood to the ignominy of government service. Policemen, soldiers, marks for any fool to shoot at; running obediently to oafish bellowings; far from the cool night wind's benison after the destroying sun.

Besides, taxes had still to be paid, and Abu Butan would have to find somebody to do their work.

Abu Butan halted suddenly and emitted a howl of anguish.

'I shall *certainly* speak to your District Commissioner,' repeated Masterson, pleased with the effect of his severity. The iron hand in the velvet glove always paid with those fellows, no matter what the politicians might say.

'Gadein!' roared Abu Butan, melodramatically clutching his brow. 'Did you not see ahead there? He has let Tula castrate him.'



The engaged girls waited at the dance-floor, which was also the feast place, to massage the legs of their heroes with oil.

'Tula is very handsome and runs very fast. He loves many girls, in a night.'

'Adam Koko loves many, many times.'

'I would rather sleep with spirits than have Adam Koko. Anyway, he has no goats for a bride-price.'

They giggled lasciviously, and chattered.

Gadein already had two bundles of grass, five blades in each, to mark the ten goats he had paid as the first instalment of Kama's bride-price. It was not dishonourably low, but it was not high, for she preferred chatter to work, and, scorning the bark apron which was good enough for her mother, clamoured for one of red cloth secured by brass wire. But Gadein had early learnt not to be ambitious, and he was prepared to work happily for two or three years to earn the remaining bride-price. Kama's tight-crimped hair was shaved down the middle. Her nose was broad, her teeth voluptuously filed. Although she still kept her childhood name and her breasts were small,

Gadein had been proud when he took her into the bushes for the first time, and returned to the cattle camp with a smear of ochre from her hair on his chest. He visited her in the girls' huts almost every night, but the other seniors' accounts of what they achieved there never seemed to tally with his own experience.

'You've paid the first bride-price, you should beat her till she submits,' advised Tula, who, young as he was, understood these things.

Gadein sighed, and clicked his tongue. He could not imagine himself beating anybody.

He limped sheepishly up to Kama after the race. No bells jingled round his waist. A little distance away, every unattached girl was fighting for the honour of anointing Tula.

Kama's friends tittered when they saw him.

'You'll have peaceful nights, Kama.'

'Did it hurt, Gadein?'

'Of course it didn't, he only had little ones.'

They moved aside, still tittering.

Kama picked up a stone with a handful of dirt and flung it in his face.

Adam Koko strolled casually to Kama, and, grinning, put his hand on her breast. Kama looked defiantly at Gadein and let it rest there. The tittering was stilled.

Gadein stood watching for a moment, a smile still on his mulberry lips, eyes strained with the effort to understand. Then he made half-heartedly for Adam Koko, who ducked and easily tripped him. Gadein clutched at Adam's legs, but the girls prevented him, scratching and biting. The triumphant seniors joined in, and Kama's father with whirling cudgel, rolling him over and over in the dirt, thumping his tender places, covering him with dirt and dishonourable blood.

They fell back before Abu Butan, coruscating with rage, who took Gadein by the ear as he lay in the dust and jerked him to his feet.

'Now,' thundered Abu Butan, his stomachs swelling majestically with the virtuous wind of public vengeance. 'You pig, you frog, you hyena, you almost-Egyptian. Explain yourself. What do you mean by letting a novice take your bells?'

Gadein stood sullenly on one leg, scratching the calf of the other with his toe.

'Tula asked me,' he said, looking at the ground. 'He said there was a girl . . .'

The fest was lost in the crash of Abu Butan's cudgel, and the happy laughter of the mob.

'He must be a lunatic,' explained Kama's father, who too rarely had public opinion on his side. 'By God, he is a lunatic. It would be impossible for him to marry Kama, they would only breed lunatics. When we feasted on the goats he paid me, our bellies were filled with worms, and we had to pay Khamyra chief heavily to cure us with his magic. To which I have witnesses,' he added hastily, feeling Abu Butan's sour eye upon him.

They chased Gadein half-way to the cattle camp, two miles off in the plain, and left him. He walked slowly round the thorn and wattle enclosure, putting his hand between the thorns to stroke a cool, damp nose. The cattle blew at him, lowed, rattled their long, magpie horns, and he breathed more easily among the accustomed sounds.

Most of the smallest boys whose duty it was to stay by the cattle, had sneaked away to steal a few scraps from the feast and watch the dancing and stick-play, but Konda was there, a wizened child whose thieving father the spirits had punished with leprosy. Konda had no friends, but was useful on occasions like this because he

was eager to curry favour by undertaking unpopular duties.

'What happened, Gadein?'

'Nothing! I was tired. Help me milk a cow.'

Konda had learnt better than to ask unnecessary questions. In silence they caught a cow, tethered her legs, and Konda held a gourd while Gadein milked. Gadein shared the thin, bluish liquid with Konda, for which the child was grateful. It was dark, and the fires two miles away flecked the sky with trembling tints of scarlet and orange. The noise was muffled, coming from a world in which they had no part.

When they had finished, Konda went silently away. Gadein lit a few twigs, boiled water, and with powdered bark tended his hurts. He wondered idly why all this happened because he had done Tula a favour, but it was troublesome to understand, and he was tired. He yawned, scratched luxuriously, fetched his blankets from the sleeping-hut, and curled up warmly. The cattle music lulled him to almost instant sleep.

This was a blessing denied to Masterson Bey, who sat at the head of the feast, in Abu Butan's own deck-chair, the canvas of which sagged uncomfortably. Abu Butan pressed upon him choice gobbets of yellow fat. A cracked enamel tea-pot, which Mackenzie's servant had never been able to find, was kept full of strong beer.

Masterson belched delicately from time to time to show appreciation, as the politicals had taught him he must, and prayed for release.

Waves of sound flowed over him, figures came and went mistily before his drooping eyes. The white-daubed figures of the stick-fighters, the woody thwack of cudgels on rival heads, reminded him hazily of a summer evening at the nets. He gave a belch which was entirely involun-

tary, and his head sank sideways on to Abu Batan's shoulder.

'Aha!' cried Abu Butan triumphantly, and four stalwart and talkative young men bore the skeleton from the feast.

The sun was up before Abu Butan himself staggered majestically to the wooden boards which formed his bed. No one else in Laweyn could have staggered. He slept uneasily for a time, tossing and turning with volcanic snores and starts. Then his breathing became shallow and regular, a happy smile settled upon his lips under the grey beard.

The spirit of The Whole World, disguised as Mackenzie, had just shown him how he might kill several birds with one stone, by sending Gadein away with this equally stupid Englishman, to be a soldier.

Mackenzie always knew best. Mackenzie, though he liked his little surprises, had never failed a devout and spirit-fearing man yet.

II

AT FIRST PARADE THE SUN SHONE WITHOUT WARMTH from a sky which had the hard clarity of lapis lazuli. The recruits crawled miserably out of the long lines of white-washed mud huts, teeth chattering, huddling into ill-fitting greatcoats, cap comforters protruding like prechaun ears from beneath their magnificent grey green turbans, called emmas.

By midday an egg would fry on the low white wall surrounding the dusty parade ground, and the recruits sought to revert to a sensible nudity. They complained at all times that sandals hurt their feet.

These jungle tendencies Bash-shawish Mohammed Ahmed El Imam resisted, not without righteous anger, but without abuse. Irreligious sergeant-majors cast aspersions upon the mothers of their flock, or compared them with buffaloes, mules, donkeys, dogs, Egyptians, and other soulless things. Bash-shawish Mohammed Ahmed did not. He was named El Imam, the Priest, because he was a devout man.

He was grizzled, tall, with spindle shanks, a barrel chest and a hawk's beak. Though absolved from the strictest ritual while serving as a soldier, Mohammed Ahmed carried a prayer mat in his kit with his charcoal iron. He had neither neglected to pray, nor to crease the knee-length tunic called a jibbah, on recruiting duty with Masterson Bey, in barracks, or on the battlefield of Keren.

The ribbon of the Distinguished Conduct Medal decorated his chest. He had won this at Keren, for carrying his wounded officer down the rocks under fire, being himself hit three times as he did so. He had thought it the obvious thing to do, the officer being English, and while he had welcomed the promotion, his deed had won him, had never quite approved the fuss the English, that excitable race, had made about it.

He looked now down the gently ~~g~~aying ranks of those who had been in his charge for three weeks, and his hawk's beak tilted a little more proudly above his pepper-and-salt moustache. They still did not know how to fold an emma, they could not stand without fidgiting for more than five minutes, they wore their jibbahs as if they were goat skins; but by God, they began to look like a company on parade.

Their faces were quite rigid with eagerness, eyes starting, veins standing out tautly on thin shanks naked

except for long, grey-green puttees atrociously wound. There were ebony faces from the swamps and forests of the south; milk-coffee faces, mobile, sensitive and clever, from the Arabised northern towns; faces with a plum's bloom, from the hill villages. Mohammed Ahmed knew them all, hundreds of them had passed through his hands. The one god they had in common was the bash-shawish, their only commonly held tradition that which he was teaching them, the only language they all understood was his word of command.

He threw out his chest until his stomach almost vanished, and shouted, 'Com-pa-nah! Tshuan!'

A rifle clattered to the ground in the rear rank.

'Nafar Gadein Gadi,' said Mohammed Ahmed gently, 'if you drop your rifle when I shout at you, what will you do when you meet a German?' His voice rose to a crescendo of thunder and lightning: 'AND DON'T PICK IT UP TILL I TELL YOU TO MOVE!'

Gadein grinned and shuffled with embarrassment as attention focused upon him. His nose itched, but he dared not scratch it. He longed, he worked, he sweated to be a good soldier; for Abu Butan, weeping at one moment, whirling his great cudgel at the next, had assured him that only thus could he regain his honour and earn the bride-price for Kama. He wished, however, that soldiering could be learnt in private, down by the cattle camp perhaps, with only the cows' soft eyes to observe his clumsiness. But already he held himself less apologetically, and his legs did not quiver at the knees when he walked.

'Yah, goat-boy!' whispered Gadein's neighbour contemptuously from the corner of his mouth.

'Stop talking in the ranks there!' roared the bash-shawish, less amiably. He had no affection for Musa

Faragella, who, a townsman, was more artful and difficult to corner than a monkey.

He about-turned, strutted ten paces like a hobbled cockerel, and handed the company over to Bimbashi Courage, its commander.

Courage was a sleek young man who gave the impression of being made from brown velvet. A month ago he had sipped his morning coffee on the terrace of Shepherd's Hotel, bathed every afternoon at the Gezira Club, and in the earlier evenings, until it was time for dinner and cabaret, had sent out necessary instructions from the Quartermaster-General's branch, G.H.Q., Middle East Forces, to the Eighth Army at El Alamein. Someone had decided that the Eighth Army would do better with fewer instructions, and Courage—given a majority to soften the blow, for he had many friends—found himself in a land he had scarcely heard of, commanding a company whose appearance he would not have believed possible. It was he who first said that Masterson Bey shook them out of the trees, cut off their tails and called them the Buna Service Corps; but it was not wise to make such remarks to Bimbashi Courage, for he was now their company commander, and loved them.

He stepped forward to deliver the little speech he had spent much of the night rehearsing. He was trembling slightly with fear of making a fool of himself, but since he commanded the company and its official language was Arabic, he meant to speak; so then himself in Arabic, and damn the consequences.

'Today, good day,' he announced in an unnecessarily high voice, then, feeling two hundred pairs of eyes on him, coughed, blushed, and, dropping an octave, continued with startling ferocity: 'You go first time in motor-

lorries. It is necessary you be very careful. Good men, no accidents. Bad men, company office.'

He spoke, only half meaning to, as if he were admonishing small children.

'I'll company office you, you illegitimate whore's son,' remarked Musa Faragella from the corner of his mouth. 'I know where you were last night, sniffing round the hospital nurses.'

'Report to me after dismiss, that man who spoke,' thundered the lash-shawish, taking the parade back into firm hands once more. Feeling it necessary to translate Bimbashi Courage's Arabic into more intelligible terms, he continued: 'The lord bimbashi says that today you will have your first driving instruction. Anyone who has an accident goes on a charge. Remember that. Now. Officer on parade - dia-smah!'

He made them do it no more than twice, to show his appreciation that this was indeed a great day, and marched A Platoon away for driving instruction.

Gadein strode out with them smartly, swinging his arms stiffly from the shoulders and taking jerky camel's strides, as he was convinced that a good soldier should.

Through three weeks he had lived for this opportunity to learn the English magic. There were three kinds of magic among the hills. The spirits of the dead might be malevolent or well-wishing, according to their nature and the manner of their death. A man who had not offended them while living had little to fear from them, and, though their whispers in lonely places in the dark, might make one's hair stand on end. More powerful and unpredictable were the spirits which were spirits, the spirits of the hill, of earth and air of the crops and rain. Sometimes they could be placated by sacrifice, and dedicated men spoke with their voices, rain priests,

harvest priests, as Abu Butan spoke with the voice of The Whole World. There were also the familiar, small spirits of rock and tree and cattle, who acknowledged men's mastery, and whom all, with virtue and due sacrifice, could command.

'Come on, help me find the cows,' Gadein would say, pouring a little milk on the ground; or 'Dig in, hoe, don't be lazy' and the spirits would respond or not, as they chose, for they too were sometimes capricious. Then Gadein would swear at them, familiarly, as to an equal. Only a man who wished to die would swear at the big spirits.

Gadein had never seen a motor-lorry until he left Laweyn, but it was clear that motor-lorries, too, had their spirits, controlled by the English their masters. He wished to learn this magic and return home triumphant at the wheel, nonchalantly displaying his mastery of the roaring beast to Tula, to Kama, to Abu Butan. He hoped Abu Butan might be scared of a lorry, but Abu Butan had once, in less peaceful days, experienced an aeroplane, and Gadein was not hopeful that a lorry would impress him.

Twenty lorries were drawn up on the plain outside the barracks. They were veterans of the Abyssinian campaign, painted in faded colours of buff and green. In charge of them were driver-instructors of the Buna Service Corps who, having been soldiers for over a year, lounged in the cabs with an air of knowing, condescension. Gadein regarded them with awe.

The commander of A Platoon, Bimbashi Oakes, fussed conscientiously among his charges, scuffling from lorry to lorry in a cloud of dust. He walked so quickly in his suede desert boots that he was known as Bimbashi Who Moves Like the Wind, or, to disrespectful men like Musa Faragella, Windy. He was tall and thin, approaching

middle age, with a camel's long upper lip, and lower jaw perpetually moving as if chewing the cud of some secret discontent. Only his untamed moustache and rakish cap, about which Masterson Bey reprimanded him weekly, gave outward evidence of the romantic heart which beat within his bony chest. For five happy months he had touched glory with Eighth Army, and spiritually he was of it yet.

He felt a little frustrated now, because he had only learnt as far as page one of the Arabic phrase book, which ran from Above through Bottle, Box, Bread and Breakfast, to Chatterbox (useful reLuxe). Designed for a more leisurely age, the book was rich in phrases about cracked heels, stirrups, martingales, clean the hoofs of my grey mare. It approached no nearer to mechanical transport than 'Call me a taxi.' Bimbashi Oakes had, with difficulty, mastered the Arabic for 'Speak more slowly' and 'Put on the brake, you fool.' For the rest he trusted to enthusiasm.

Gadcin regarded him with awe, and absolute faith. In Laweyn, each man had his place. There was the clan, and the head of the clan, father of many hills. Each hill had its cluster of villages, ruled by its chief, such as Abu Butan. Each village had its sheikh, each household within the village its head. One grew up into one's age-grade, rising from the lowly status of novice to be a senior, then a Father of the Boys, Father, and at last, grandfather. If one were rich, one ceremonially speared a buli, and became an elder. To each group, appropriate deference must be paid.

Gadcin knew little of the English world. He had seen no Englishmen except District Commissioners, who conversed only with his father; but he knew that each Englishman, too, had his place in the hierarchy, with His

Excellency the Governor, unspeakably great, as father of the clan. His Excellency's sons spoke with powerful magic, this man with the magic of aeroplanes, that with the magic of machine-guns, as Abu Butan had the farming magic, the chief's family of Khamyra had the magic to cure stomach ills, and the chief's family of craggy Syniva had the magic to cure the wasting sickness of which men died. Bimbashi Oakes possessed the magic of motor-lorries; and since the English controlled all magic, as no hillman did, he was able to share his magic with Gadein.

Gadein bowed his head as Bimbashi Oakes alarmingly approached, and with a full heart gave him the salute which was his due.

'Chatterbox,' said Bimbashi Oakes surprisingly, and catching up Gadein in the whirlwind of his progress, pushed the boy into the driving seat of a lorry.

'See!' he said with the air of a benevolent wizard.

He turned the ignition key and pulled the self-starter. The lorry bucked forward, almost precipitating Gadein through the insecure door, and came to an ill-tempered stop.

'Damn!' said Bimbashi Oakes in English, and knocking the gear lever into neutral, prepared to make a fresh beginning.

Gadein put his Emma straight, breathed deeply, and regarded the lorry with a suspicion which all Bimbashi Oakes's air of knowing what he was about could not dispel.

It was as if he had stepped into a concealed pit. He had believed that the English controlled this world of lorry magic, that in their care he would be gifted with a little of their power. Now he saw sadly that it was not so. The spirits of motor-lorries were as freakish, must be propitiated as watchfully, as the great spirits of earth and air and rain. Neither Bimbashi Oakes, nor Bimbashi Courage,

nor Masterson Bey, not even His Excellency the Governor himself, could do more than his father to control them.

Humbly he followed Bimbashi Oakes through the propitiatory rites. The key was turned, the starter handle pulled. Sometimes the spirit was agreeable, more often not.

After ten minutes Bimbashi Oakes whirled away, content that he had given another recruit a fair beginning.

The driver-instructor took over. He was an Arab, worshipping other gods. With an air of boredom he put the lorry into bottom gear and released the handbrake.

'Now keep the thing straight, or I'll kick you from here to hell,' he said dispassionately, and settled back with no great interest to watch what happened.

His fearlessness gave Gadein courage. A little of the magic could perhaps be learnt. The plain was five miles square and contained only twenty lorries. About and about they turned. Occasionally Gadein bumped another, while, with a fatalism bred of centuries' subordination to the ruthless elements, he folded his hands upon the wheel and resigned himself to the will of the spirits.

One day his instructor, to break the monotony, took him to a patch of soft sand.

'Now,' said the instructor, 'I'm going to show you how to use the sand-channel. See these things strapped to the side of the truck here?'

Gadein looked with reverence at the long strips of pierced steel.

'Unstrap them,' commanded the instructor, who believed that doing, for others, was the best form of instruction.

Gadein did so.

'Now,' said the instructor again, 'put them under the front wheels. Come round here. Hurry, you're a soldier

now, not a goat-boy. Start the lorry. Pull the throttle out. Jump down, put her into gear. The lorry goes. When the back wheel's over the sand channel, you pick it up, run round to the front, and put it under the wheels again. See? Now I'll do it just once more, then you try it.'

'All right, wakil-ombashi,' said Gadein, breathing devotion. He performed the rites, and ran with a will under the cruel sun on the breathless plain. The lorry, driverless, churned forward on its platform over the soft sand. Presently there was no more soft sand, but Gadein had no sense of cause and effect, he lived in a chaotic world ruled by the whims of spirits. The lorry moved away from him, faster and faster, and he panted to catch up.

'Here, stop it,' shouted the instructor, horrified.

The lorry ran on. When Gadein saw that the spirits had taken command, he stood helpless. Then it seemed to him funny to see a lorry running away, spirit-driven. He began to laugh. He rolled on the ground, wallowing in the blessed laughter which was his relief from the spirits' persecution.

The instructor knew nothing about spirits.

'What do you think you're doing?' he demanded crossly, and kicked him hard. 'You're on charge. Look at the truck.'

The lorry was piled up against a rock, half a mile away. In this manner Gadein learnt that the army disapproved of laughter.

From coloured charts explained by Bimbashi Osman Fadialla El Nil, who had had a long and honourable career in the Nile Transport Corps, he learnt the daily rites of serving the internal combustion engine. In six weeks he was classified as a third-class driver. Then the company was mobilised, and he was given a lorry of his own.

'I can get you more than a pound for the tool-kit, down in the suk,' said Musa Faragella helpfully.

Gadein clicked his tongue.

'He who steals gets leprosy,' he said with piously folded hands.

Musa kicked him, and went off whistling to see whether a widow in the harimic lines was as urphaste in deed as in word.

III

MUSA FARAGELLA WAS DRAWN TO GADEIN BY A fascination he never thought of trying to analyse.

He was, like Gadein, just turned seventeen. His father, when fairly sober, drove a battered taxi. His mother sold fly-soiled sweetmeats and ran a semi-professional brothel among the tangled mazes of the suk.

From an early age Musa had learnt that one looked after oneself, or starved. He owed allegiance neither to God, government nor man. One day, however, when he was both penniless and bored, he met a driver of the Buna Service Corps in a café. The driver, who was on leave, had money to spend.

'They pay you all right in the army,' Musa said enviously. He had hitherto thought poorly of soldiers, slaves to an alien discipline.

The driver winked.

'It's no good in the infantry. But you try driving a lorry in and out of petrol dumps all day. Or supplies. Sacks of sugar, more than you ever saw in your life. The English are so rich, they don't miss a few spillings.'

'By God?' said Musa thoughtfully.

'By God.'

Having picked the driver's pocket, Musa gratefully bought him a drink, and went to the recruiting office.

In days of peace the Buna Service Corps would not have accepted Musa Faragella, but they had been asked by a harassed G.H.Q. to form six transport companies as quickly as possible. Musa had a ready tongue, and no reluctance to claim his father's driving experience as his own. His distant cousin, a minor pillar of the Independence Party, had been commissioned in the Service Corps as part of the price for the Independence Party's blessing on the Corps serving outside Buna. He agreed, after hard bargaining, to give Musa an excellent reference. Also, Musa Faragella had a face of extraordinary innocence and beauty, the eyes hazel, the forehead wide and uncreased, nose cleanly cut, soft and slightly parted lips set off by a neatly kept moustache which spoke not of manhood but, appealingly, of an adolescent's precocious attempt at manhood. His manner, to authority, was gentle and respectful. At the time of his medical inspection he happened to be free from venereal disease.

Musa had been a soldier for three days when Gadein arrived in barracks. This was longer than he generally worked at anything, and he felt tired but virtuous. He stared at the long-legged country boys as he would have stared at an elephant; his first reaction, as to anything strange, was to savage them.

He contented himself for the moment, however, by overturning the angreb, the laced cane bed on a low frame, where Gadein sat contemplating the wealth of his new kit.

Gadein, who had felt lost, was immediately at home, for this they did to new boys in the seniors' huts at

Laweyn. He sprawled among his scattered treasures and smiled good-naturedly, rather humbly, at Musa standing above him. He felt it a condescension in a townsman to notice a country boy at all.

That evening Gadein sat alone in the barrack hut, wrestling with an intractable problem. He had had an active day, he felt hungry, but he could not eat. This was not due to shortage of food. Army rations bewildered him by their lavishness for he was used at home to a single daily meal of grain porridge and sesame oil, washed down with thin milk. Meat he ate perhaps once in three months, on religious occasions. He could go for several days without food if necessary, but this evening his nostrils had been tantalised by the delicious odour of mutton and ground-out stew, spiced with curry and red peppers, from the mess hut. He hung about outside, watching the men jostling in, and coming out slowly, unbuttoned, belching appreciatively. No one took any notice of him. When the last had gone, he timidly entered the mess hut. A cook, hearing footsteps, stuck his head through the serving door.

'What do you want?' he asked angrily, cooks being by nature hostile.

'Food,' Gadein almost whispered.

'You're late. Have you got a paper?'

'I didn't know I had to have a paper.'

'No paper, no food,' said the cook with satisfaction, and slammed the door.

Gadein returned miserably to the barrack hut, where he began plaiting three grasses together in the way which sometimes averts evil.

Musa entered, swaggering slightly, for he had been drinking his own and several other men's beer rations at the canteen.

'Hallo, goat-boy.'

'Hallo.'

Musa patrolled up and down once or twice, rolling his hips, cufiting at the angrebs with a stick. He carefully hit near enough to Gadein to make him uncomfortable, but without touching him. Finding that Gadein seemed too poor-spirited to quarrel, he sat down on somebody else's angreb, swept the kit on to the floor, and began to clean his teeth by chewing the stick.

'The food they give you in the army stinks,' he said querulously, spitting out fragments of meat and stick.

Gadein looked up, but said nothing.

'Well, doesn't it?' Musa demanded.

'I don't know, I haven't had any.' Gadein spoke timidly, mumbling into his lap, where the plaited grasses lay between the huge pink palms of his hands, scarred with black-encrusted lines.

'Why haven't you had any?'

Gadein hesitated whether to speak, or be silent. The strangeness of the world, the loneliness, afflicted him with a craving for noise and friendship. He longed above all to laugh. Musa, though he seemed perpetually cross, had at least spoken to him, and was a townsman, knowing all things.

'It is forbidden to eat meat with other clans,' he whispered, a little ashamed; for while one may speak openly of sex in Laweyn, noting up one's exploits like the displayed jawbones of skin gazelle, it is unclean to speak about food.

'Why? Who forbids it?' Musa heard of the prohibition with neither surprise nor alarm. There were many laws, all made to be broken.

'The spirits.' Gadein's voice sank even lower. 'They would give me leprosy.'

Musa flung himself back on the bed in astonishment. He was about to express his opinion of the spirits, but shut his mouth quickly, and a calculating look came into his eyes.

He pulled a slip of rice paper from the leather bracelet above his elbow and, crinkling it enticingly, said, 'I've got a powerful charm against spirits. Verse from the Koran, copied by a very holy man. I wouldn't let you have this, but I could get you one.'

Hope came into Gadein's eyes at sight of the paper.

'Would you get me one?' In his voice was all the country boy's humility before the superior knowledge of the town.

'It'll cost you fifty piastres,' Musa said sharply. His own paper was genuine enough, though he carried it, without much belief, only as a precautionary measure. He knew a clerk in the suk, however, not at all holy, who would write rihaldries for much less than fifty piastres.

Gadein dropped his eyes, hope lost again.

'I have nothing.'

'That's all right,' said Musa, swaggering over to Gadein's angreb. He picked up mess-tins, a jibbah, the still unfolded emma cloth, all marketable. 'I'll keep these for you till you get some money. You can buy them back when you're paid, it'll only cost you sixty piastres.'

A quiet voice from the open door said, 'Come here, you.'

Gadein started guiltily, half falling towards the voice. Musa sprang smartly to attention and assumed his speaking-to-authority meekness.

'Not you,' said Bash-shawish Mohammed Ahmed to Gadein. 'You with the moustache. Come here.'

Musa came, saluting.

The bash-shawish paternally took his ear, twisted it

gently, and rhythmically accentuating his words with a cane on Musa's behind, said, 'First of all, you salute an officer. You don't salute a bash-shawish. What were you telling this other nafar?'

'We were talking about religion,' Musa said virtuously. It was his pride to discover quickly the weak points of potential enemies, and he already knew much about Mohammed Ahmed El Imam.

'Mess-tins, a jibbah and an emma cloth have very little to do with religion,' said the bash-shawish, accelerating the rhythm of his cane.

'I was also explaining about certain other things,' Musa replied quickly. 'This is an ignorant man, he hasn't eaten because of the spirits.'

Mohammed Ahmed stopped plying his cane.

'Haven't you eaten?'

Gadein shook his head, grinning foolishly.

'Why not?'

'I can't eat with other men, and they said I must have a paper to eat alone. This man promised to get me a paper.'

Musa looked apprehensive.

'This man's a liar, bash-shawish,' he exclaimed hastily. 'It wasn't that kind of paper.'

'Shut up, you,' said the bash-shawish. He looked steadily at Gadein. 'You're from the hills, aren't you?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'I am a Muslim. You know what that means?'

'Yes, my lord.' Gadein did indeed know. The Muslims had a magic almost as powerful as Englishmen.

'God tells me that I must do certain things, or He will be angry. But some of these things I can't do in the army. He knows that, and forgives me. I have known many men from the hills. It is the same with them, the spirits forgive.

You may eat, while in the army, with other men. Understood?’

‘Yes, my lord. Will you give me a paper?’

‘You call me “sir”,’ said the bash-shawish resignedly. ‘And I will give you a paper for your supper, to the cook-house. That’s the only paper you want.’

He wrote. Timidly Gadein held out his mess-tins, jibbah and Emma cloth.

‘You do not buy papers, and you do not sell your kit,’ said the bash-shawish sharply. ‘Someone tried that trick on me, when I was a young soldier. He went to hospital.’

He gave Musa a final warning tap and strutted out, cane held stiffly under his left arm.

‘Bastard,’ said Musa when he was safely away, and spat after him, then turned sharply on Gadein. ‘All right, if he wants us to fight.’

He half pulled a knife from its embossed sheath on the elbow brace. He meant only to reimpose the pattern of his former easy conquest, but Gadein moved swiftly, picked up Musa in the wrestler’s grip which little boys in Laweyn learnt as soon as they could walk, and threw him across the hut on to his own angreb.

He towered above Musa, scraggy but nearly six feet tall, unsure what the next move should be according to the code of this new life. One did not fight with knives in Laweyn, except to the death, in blood feud.

Musa lay for a moment with tears in his eyes. He wept easily when he could not get his own way, a trick he had often found useful. Then he smiled, briskly rose, and said, ‘I was only joking, goat-boy. It takes a knife to get a joke into your thick skull.’

Gadein smiled again, happy to have been permitted to share a joke with a townsman.

'Here, give me that paper,' Musa said, snatching. 'We'll go down to the cookhouse and get something to eat.'

But Gadein kept the paper, in a bracelet on his arm, to guard him from the wrath of spirits when he ate with other clans.

Thereafter, however, they were friends. Gadein cleaned Musa's sandals, and protected him from assault. In return Musa offered to introduce Gadein, at cut prices, to the delights behind his mother's sweet counter. Gadein refused shyly, the punishment inflicted by the spirits for carnal relations outside the clan being almost as bad as leprosy. Musa was the more intrigued that this, the utmost he knew in the way of friendship, was unwelcome.

* * *

Some days after Gadein and Musa had added three-ton Chevrolet lorries to their responsibilities, Masterson Bey was told by his servant that tool-kits were fetching more than a pound in the suk.

Masterson had been to a school with the word 'Grammar' in its title, and could get a commission only in the Royal Army Service Corps. He was uneasily aware that the politicals who governed Burma came straight from Oxford and Cambridge with double blues and double firsts in dazzling profusion. In a precise style which gained from their acquaintance with Petronius Arbitrator and C. B. Fry, they protested frequently at the quality of army officers sent to them in wartime, of whom Masterson was an especial target. In compensation, he laboriously sought to build a reputation as disciplinarian and big game hunter, little knowing, poor fellow, that the politicals called him the Elephant Strangler and composed Greek epigrams about his moustache.

Masterson Bey's office was a square, high room with

whitewashed walls, and green shutters closed against the noon heat. There was a mangy lion skin in front of his desk, and on the walls were mounted the masks of those unhappy creatures which he had pursued and slain. It was hopefully said in various messes that one day, Masterson's own head might adorn some lion's den in the remoter hills.

On the desk, besides two telephones, was a battery of bell pushes. Masterson pressed one of these, and the orderly-room sergeant appeared. The orderly-room sergeant was told to summon the adjutant, who was ordered to produce Bimbashi Courage. Bimbashi Courage was marched in, somewhat apologetically, by the adjutant, and stood on the lion skin.

'Ah, yes,' said Masterson Bey, and looked at him for several seconds. Then he assumed an expression of great cunning and said suddenly, 'I suppose you know how much your tool-kits are fetching, down in the Ak?'

About a pound apiece, sir, I understand,' Courage answered carelessly.

'Oh,' said Masterson, baffled. Then, with the ferocity of a charging lion, 'May I ask what steps you're taking to prevent losses?'

'I've told the platoon officers to hold plenty of spot checks, sir.'

'Ah,' said Masterson, sitting back and purring above his prey. 'When you've been in this country as long as I have, Courage, you'll learn not merely to give orders. If you want a thing done, you must do it yourself.' *Verb. sap.* he added hopefully, seeking to indicate that he too was one of the politicals, with a knowledge of the classics. 'When did *you* last hold a check?'

In the past ten days Bimbashi Courage had taken on his personal charge one hundred torries, arms, ammunition

and quartermaster's stores to scale, had examined two hundred pay-books, interviewed over a hundred drivers, and learnt a column of Arabic vocabulary.

'I haven't had much time, sir,' he said resentfully.

'You have time to pay frequent visits to the hospital, Courage.' Masterson Bey regretted that Courage's velvet charm had made big game stories less popular at the hospital. 'I must remind you that you are in a sense the father and the mother of a native company, they make demands upon you which British troops are almost adult enough not to make. Twenty-four hours a day aren't sufficient, if you mean to have a crack company.'

'Yes, sir,' said Courage unenthusiastically, wondering which of the politicals had been at the Elephant Strangler again.

'And tell Bimbashi Maule that His Excellency's secretary himself saw him at the Grand the other night with a creased bush-jacket. I don't like civilian complaints about my officers, Courage. That will do.'

Masterson, discipline upheld, took a handful of papers from his in-tray and looked for a dotted line. Courage, putting considerable hatred into his quivering salute, swept back to inform his officers that they were lazy, insubordinate and improperly dressed, and that he proposed to hold a snap tool-kit inspection in fifteen minutes.

Bimbashi Oakes, smarting from a double rebuke for his disgraceful cap and calling his company commander 'Tommy', scuffed back to A Platoon office in a pillar of dust, and seizing upon the first driver he saw, ordered him to tell Shawish Abdullahi to get all tool-kits laid out immediately.

Musa Faragella, for it was he, paled to a dirty yellow, and ran as fast as he could to where Gadein was tending his lorry.

This Gadein did, at first fearfully, then with love, according to the rites laid down. Every day it must be fed with petrol and water. Certain rites were reserved to the English mechanics, who alone understood them; but Gadein ensured that the tyres were blacklead, springs polished, and the bodywork washed with clean water. A spirit which lived in the tyre spoke through a tube of their need for sustenance, and this tube Gadein carried about with him, a reassuring symbol of his participation in the English magic.

'Gadein!' Musa shouted, his voice trembling. He never thought far enough ahead to consider retribution, which always took him by surprise and made him indignant.

Gadein stuck out his head from beneath the lorry. He wore silver-green, grease-spotted overalls which heightened the dark sheen of his skin. Now that he began to be on familiar terms with the small domestic spirits of the lorry, its underside in the afternoon heat was the nearest thing he had found to the seclusion of the cattle camp.

'Quick, Gadein. Give me your tool-kit.'

Gadein's mind adjusted itself slowly to a new situation. Still thinking of the sun's golden shimmer on polished metal, he pointed to his outspread tools.

'God will guard you,' said Musa, who never condescended to explain, and vanished.

A few minutes later he returned, strutting importantly as a platoon messenger should, genuinely filled with a spirit of virtue.

'Here's your tool-kit. Better get it laid out, there's an inspection in five minutes.'

He swaggered away down the line of lorries.

'All right now, I'll soon be back,' Gadein remarked to the differential which he was polishing. He crawled

reluctantly from beneath his truck, and opened the bag of tools. He did not yet know what they were all for, but there seemed fewer than there had been. He scratched his head, leaving a streak of grease across his crisp hair. He looked at the tools again, a little acid question-mark of doubt eating into his trust.

Suddenly he came to life.

'Musa!' he shouted, and began to lope after Musa with long, side-kicking strides. An N.C.O. tried to stop him, but Gadein could think of only one thing at a time.

Musa glanced quickly over his shoulder, saw Gadein running, and shot round the corner of a hut, into the arms of Driver Byrne, one of A Platoon's English mechanics.

'Who do you think you're pushing, you stinking wog?' asked Driver Byrne. He was not angry; but, conceived against a wall in a Liverpool cul-de-sac, he was experiencing for the first time in his life the pleasure of having someone to kick.

'I'm sorry,' Musa answered, polite as always to the master race's face. Conscious of Gadein pounding in pursuit, he tried to dodge round Driver Byrne, who grabbed him by the collar and began, quite gently, to shake him.

Musa wriggled, tears of thwarted pride filling his eyes. He forgot why he had been running.

'Gadein!' he called in the tones of a child. 'Gadein!'

Gadein raced round the corner, filled with the hurt animal's blind desire to destroy. When he saw Musa in Driver Byrne's grasp, he, too, forgot why he was running. He did not like Driver Byrne, who had a habit of stamping ammunition boots on sandalled toes when displeased; but Driver Byrne had his place in the hierarchy

of the English. All-powerful, he was as entitled to express displeasure violently as Abu Butan to use his cudgel.

Musa saw Gadein pause.

'He called me flicking wog,' urged Musa enticingly, his voice plummy with self-pity.

Gadein did not know what 'flicking wog' meant, but he had learnt that, from Driver Byrne, it was the mortal insult. There were such words in Laweyn, usable only at risk of death. Blood flooded his brain. He advanced head down, forehead creased, his eyes red and blind.

'You lay off,' said Driver Byrne, more surprised than alarmed. He would just like to see a wog with the guts to bash a white man.

Gadein had no conception, except in the ritual of stick-play or wrestling, of fighting fairly. His knee took Driver Byrne in the groin. Byrne grunted with pain, releasing Musa, and kicked out, clumsily. Gadein, trained to fighting, kned him in the groin again, then in the stomach.

Byrne doubled up, groaning. Gadein stood back, not because he had inhibitions about hitting a man who was down, but because he was surprised, even a little apprehensive, that an Englishman should collapse so easily.

Musa's voice froze the roaring torrent of his anger.

'You've done it now,' Musa said with satisfaction. 'They'll send you to prison.'

He ran off to establish his position on the side of authority.

Gadein stood dumb, hands straight to his sides, as pointing out, in the ritual of attention. He saw nothing, heard nothing, only sought to placate the outraged English spirits:

He still stood there when Bimbashi Oakes came scurrying, Shawish, Abdullahi, and men who held him.

'He tried to knife me, sir,' groaned Driver Byrne. He was not consciously lying, but in Driver Byrne's world all wogs fought with knives.

Gadein marched away under escort smartly, woodenly, head up, arms swinging stiffly, trying to be a good soldier. He no longer believed in his heart that this was the will of the spirits, but he had to try.

IV

'STAND UP AND STAND TO ATTENTION WHEN I'M speaking to you,' commanded Bash-shawish Mohammed Ahmed. He rattled his cane peremptorily on the guard-room floor, so that the trodden earth was pocked as if by machine-gun fire, and thin columns of dust spiralled upwards to dance in the hard rays of the electric bulb.

Gadein made the ancreb creak sulkily. He had pulled over his head a blanket which smelt cosily of his own sweat, and huddled beneath it. The blanket was poor protection from the light, the cruel world, his misery; but it was familiar, and it was all he had.

'Did you hear what I said?' roared Mohammed Ahmed. The resting members of the guard sprang involuntarily from sleep to attention with a rattle of equipment; the sentry outside sternly challenged the darkness to show that he, too, was awake, down in the harimat lines where women's shrill wranglings were stilled at the distant tones of their master's voice.

Gadein put the inadequate blanket from him with a groan. When he was happy, his clear skin glowed as if lit from within; but now the light was quenched, his

eyes were yellow with dejection, his body will-less. He wanted to die. In the hills men did die for no other reason than that they believed it to be the will of the spirits.

The guard commander, a grizzled, wrinkled creature with two stripes on his sleeve and bad feet, had assured Gadein that none escaped from court-martial with less than six months' imprisonment.

'Lashings every day, and no food,' he had said, rolling the words round his tongue. He welcomed guardroom duty, for the troubles of others often helped take his mind off his feet.

Gadein sat for a moment on the angreh's edge. Then, sucked upward by the bash-shawish's eye, he did, in some sort, stand to attention.

'That's better,' said Mohammed Ahmed with modified approval. 'Fingers lightly clenched, thumbs in line with the seams of the jibbah. A soldier's always a soldier, even in the guardroom. Any complaints?'

Gadein looked up, startled. He had many complaints, but had not expected an opportunity to voice them. Brain and tongue tried to cope quickly with the tally of his wrongs. He stammered.

'Shut up,' said Mohammed Ahmed.

Gadein went limp once more.

'A soldier never has any complaints,' said the bash-shawish. His voice rose. 'When a soldier is asked if he has any complaints, he stands smartly to attention, and he says, "No, sir".'

'No, sir,' said Gadein, becoming rigid with hatred.

'Good,' said Mohammed Ahmed, noting these signs of returning self-respect. 'Now tell me about all that foolishness this afternoon.'

Gadein began to speak slowly and sulkily. With words,

he rediscovered the pleasure of having a grievance. He became animated and shrill.

'Good,' said the bash-shawish again, when Gadein had finished. 'You'll be on company office tomorrow morning. Your sandals are filthy, and your emma's a disgrace. I want to see you properly dressed. Can you manage that, or do I have to nurse you?'

'I can manage it,' Gadein said viciously.

'“Sir”.

'Sir.' He almost spat with it.

'That's much better. All right, dismiss.'

The bash-shawish marched to the door, turned with his hand on the latch and, drawing himself up yet more stiffly, said: 'You'll get on very well with the English if you remember two things. Always do what they tell you, and don't ask questions. Questions make them excited. Never hit an Englishman, because the law of their country forbids them to hit back. You may think that unmanly, but there it is. Understood?'

'Yes, sir,' said Gadein automatically, brow creased with the effort to understand.

'Did you use a knife this afternoon?'

'No, sir,' said Gadein, surprised.

'It is in God's hands,' remarked the bash-shawish with satisfaction. 'He knew his Byrnc.'

When he had gone, Gadein lay down again on the bed. Something hard jabbed his thigh, and an exploratory finger touched the tyre pressure gauge, warm in the pocket of the shorts he wore under his jibbahi. The tyre pressure gauge stood for the English magic, which meant Bimbashi Courage. Bimbashi Courage had spoken to him only once. After parade one afternoon, they had been making tea in the barrack hut, when the lord bimbashi unexpectedly appeared.

There was silence, no one knowing whether tea-making was a crime, but Bimbashi Courage smiled his velvet smile and asked in kind tones, 'All right?'

Musa stepped from the admiring ruck, saying boldly, 'My lord, would you like some tea?'

'Thank you very much,' Bimbashi Courage replied, and sipped gingerly from the mess-tin. It had been washed in running water, not, as the slovenly English did, in a grease-laden bowl; but Bimbashi Courage did not understand that, and was able to marvel at his own heroism.

He smiled again, and left them. That was all, but Gadein, grinning and wriggling with embarrassment, had found at that moment a new father.

He rose now from the angreb and began to polish his sandals. At first he did this morosely, brooding on his wrongs. Then a deep heart of ox-blood began to glow through the sandal's patina. He held it up to the light, eliminated a thumb-print, began to sing.

The guard commander entered, his baboon face wrinkled to a mask of misery.

• 'What are you singing for? Do you like being lashed?'

Gadein grinned fatuously, and touched the tyre pressure gauge with the tips of his fingers.

'You pull down your pants and lift up your jibbañ,' said the guard commander happily. 'Only the back, you understand; it is forbidden in regulations to expose the prisoner's private parts to ridicule. Then you lie spread-eagled, with a damp cloth on your bottom. It prevents cuts. The bash-shawish calls out each stroke: "One! Two! Three!"' The guard commander poked them lovingly. 'I should think you'll get twenty-five. Shawish Abdel Rahman is the company lasher at the moment, he brought a new rhino hide whip back from leave. It hurts

more than bull's pizzle. If you wince you're done for, you'll be laughed out of the company.'

The guard commander rubbed his own bottom with enjoyment.

Gadein continued to grin oafishly. His imagination could not compass the future. He only knew that in Laweyn, before a novice can graduate to seniority, he must run the gauntlet of seniors armed with switches, walking slowly between them to show that he feels nothing. He had not winced then, and perhaps he would not wince tomorrow. If his sandals were clean, he would not wince. He went on polishing his sandals.

* 'Anyway,' said the guard commander disappointedly, 'it is forbidden by regulations to sing in the guardroom. If I hear you again, I'll put you on a charge.'

He limped away, his feet hurting badly.

'Son of a bitch, whelped in a ditch,' chanted Gadein under his breath. It was an expression used by Musa Faragella, and it made Gadein feel sophisticated. He went on singing, though quietly.

★ ★ ★

There were rarely fewer than twenty men on orderly room, divided about equally between charges and complaints. The queue stretched from the company office door, along the patio of the mud hut supported on its rough-hewn logs, past the clerks' office and the unused but frequently inspected Prophylactic Centre, and vanished round the corner. Soldiers in the public eye stood smartly at ease and were called smartly to attention when an officer passed. Those happier soldiers round the corner sat in the dust and chattered. Most of them suffered from endemic syphilis or deficiency diseases, and, in contrast to their magnificent crimas and starched

jibbabs, wore bandages covering half-healed sores. These bandages quickly took on the dun hue of the barrack dust and looked, on spindly black shanks, like the identification rings placed about the legs of chickens.

Bimbashi Courage, who sometimes over-estimated his own powers, had decided that he knew enough Arabic to take company office without an interpreter. He did not like Mulazim Awal Abdulla El Taha, his Native Staff Officer and Musa Faragella's remote cousin. Abdulla Effendi, though in his middle twenties, looked as if he had lived for years on Turkish delight. He talked too much, mostly about Bunawi independence, and as he talked he covered those before him with a fine spray of saliva.

So Bimbashi Courage waited alone, brown velvet elbows spread on the blanket-covered trestle table. He was unhappy. Bimbashi Oakes now called him 'Sir' punctiliously, but refused to speak to him in mess. There were more tool-kit deficiencies than he would have believed possible. There was the case of Nafar Gadein Gadi and Driver Byrne. He began to think that Masterson Bey had been right about his company. Natives, he thought, were natives, whether they came from Buna or Egypt. Everyone knew how to handle Egyptians, and the Bunawi were no more children than they were. The only thing to do with them was to lash them hard and often.

'First case,' he called out with set jaw, though somewhat uneasily. He had never witnessed a lashing, and did not know that he would like it.

The bash-shawish marched in a flat-faced, thickset boy who, when ordered to turn right, turned left. As the lightning played about his head, his face took on the paralysis of fear, so that when, at last, Bimbashi Courage asked him what he wanted, he could only gulp.

This morning, Courage saw stupidity where previously he had seen child-like and endearing innocence. He began to lose patience.

'March away,' he commanded. 'Return when he speaks.'

Bash-shawish Mohammed Ahmed, not altering the fixed line of his stare twenty-four inches above the company commander's head, bellowed orders. There was an explosion like the 'pop' of an opened champagne bottle, and words fizzed from the soldier.

'Shut up,' shouted the bash-shawish.

Words continued to cream and effervesce.

'All right,' said Bimbashi Courage wearily in English. 'Let him stay, now he's found his tongue.'

The torrent flowed over him. He gathered that the soldier wanted a posting to another company of the Service Corps. Courage had several of these applications a day, which generally marked renewal of the rumour that their own company was moving to North Africa.

'Application refused,' he said unsympathetically, and waited for the body to be removed.

The boy stood rooted. His prominent adam's apple bobbed up and down, his eyes were glazed.

'My lord,' he said desperately.

'Shut up! About turn!'

The boy stood there.

'Courage, conscious of his own goodness, took pity.

'What is it?' he asked with a rough gentleness.

The cork exploded again.

Courage looked, with a helplessness he scarcely bothered to conceal, at the bash-shawish.

'What does he say?'

Still staring at the wall, Mohammed Ahmed spoke to his company commander as to a child, using, with faint

distaste, the language which these Englishmen believed to be Arabic.

'He want posting. He say Wakil-ombashi Haneef Mohammed bewitch him to die.'

'Haneef Mohammed what?'

'Bewitch him,' Mohammed Ahmed repeated patiently. 'The wakil-ombashi cast spell, perhaps stick pins in dust figure, perhaps bury nail parings. Tomorrow perhaps, in the time of the apricots, this soldier die.' As a good Muslim, Mohammed Ahmed could not resist a little scepticism, even in a orderly room.

Bimbashi Courage shrugged resignedly.

'Not understood,' he said. 'Call Abdulla Effendi.'

Abdulla Effendi came bustling, but without haste. He bustled because he always bustled, having a gift for making a great show of activity without doing anything. He did not hasten because he was concerned to show, first, that he was busy; second, that it was a mistake to hold orderly room without him. He approved vehemently of independence, but not in Bimbashi Courage.

'Wakil-ombashi Haneef Mohammed is bewitching this fellow so that he will die,' he explained off-handedly in English to Courage. 'It is personal magic, so, if he is in other company, there will be no harm.'

Bimbashi Courage concentrated on not showing his bewilderment.

'That's only a try-on, isn't it?'

'Oh, it is all nonsense,' Abdulla Effendi answered grandly, 'but these natives are ignorant, if they believe they will die, they will die. I will arrange his posting. Take him away, bash-shawish.'

Courage swallowed his resentment at having command thus taken from his hands. He had been warned by Masterson, who had been warned by the politicals, that

if Abdulla Effendi were offended, a first-class political row would result. The English officers, therefore, treated Abdulla Effendi as if he were an unexploded bomb, which pleased him. There were, however, methods of disarming him.

'All right, Abdulla Effendi, I know you're busy,' Courage said sweetly.

Abdulla Effendi hustled and sprayed saliva in an effort to explain, without disclaiming business, why he should stay. When he found the task beyond him, he swept into the sunshine, starched shorts and shirt rustling, and blasted the parade outside for coming lethargically to attention.

Courage wiped the moist palms of his hands, adjusted the sweat-rag round his neck, and thought that it would soon be time to change into the second dry shirt of the day. The heat entered in waves, as if an oven door were being opened and shut. Courage was not given to connected thinking at any time, but the heat dulled his brain, so that he accepted a matter of witchcraft as yet another Bunawi eccentricity he did not wish to understand.

'Next man,' he called limply, and sat waiting, glad of the respite.

The next soldier was squat and coal-black, with cicatrised cheeks, and the air of an eager sheep, which faintly irritated Courage.

This nafar had suffered an accident to his lorry, and explained it fluently, with a rapt expression, as if he were repeating a lesson quickly before he forgot it.

'My lord, the driver in front of me was going very, very fast. My speed was fifteen miles an hour. As I pulled out to overtake him . . .'

'What?' demanded Courage, wakening from torpor.

'My lord?' said the soldier eagerly.

'If front lorry very fast, you fifteen miles an hour, how you overtake?'

'My lord?' said the soldier again, puzzled.

'Look here,' said Courage, leaning earnestly forward across the desk. His own sanity seemed to depend on bringing this story within the framework of English logic. 'Front lorry go fast, you go slow. How you overtake? You must go faster.'

'But my lord, I cannot go more than fifteen miles an hour. It is painted on my lorry,' the soldier reminded him with eager deference.

Embarrassed Courage sat sharply back.

'Three days' stoppage of pay,' he snapped, adding vindictively, 'and see that he has extra drills. He's lazy.' He immediately felt contrite, and wished to apologise to somebody.

Gadein knew nothing about the mysteries of orderly room, but much about the summary punishments rapped out by his own father. When the bash-shawish shouted his name, he jumped with fear, not of the lash but of wincing under it; fear, also, of the unknown. His carefully folded emma was knocked awry, and dust clouded his sandals.

'Clean them,' ordered Mohammed 'Ahmad, calmly waiting.

Gadein sought something to clean them with. He had nothing but his fist, which, sweating, removed more polish.

'Here!' said Mohammed Ahmed contemptuously. He removed his own splendid emma, took from inside it a cleaning cloth, and watched while Gadein repaired the damage. He straightened Gadein's emma, jerked his jiblah into its proper lines, roughly pulled his belt so that the polished brass buckle was exactly centred. Then

the official glaze came upon his face, and he roared commands.

Gadein jerked arms and legs like a marionette, his mind blank, hanging on to consciousness only through the bash-shawish's voice. That ceased, he lost his last hold on sanity. Staring fixedly, taking care, as laid down in regulations, not to reveal his private parts, he pulled up his jibbah and loosened his trousers.

'Stand still, you!' roared the bash-shawish, shocked out of his accustomed petrification.

Bimbashi Courage jumped up with a half-formed idea that the savage who had assaulted Driver Byrne must be reaching for a knife. The escort, a good soldier who awaited orders, stood woodenly; so Courage himself leapt forward and pinioned Gadein's arms.

They stood ridiculously clasped for a moment, both trembling with fear, until Mohammed Ahmed and the escort took over, and Bimbashi Courage withdrew, wiping his forehead, behind the table.

In relief at his escape, he felt a flooding kindliness.

'You're a silly fellow, aren't you?' he said, with a giggle he could not control. 'Why you want kill me?'

Shock upon shock had robbed Gadein of speech, of thought. The words were only sounds.

'Fool, madman! What's the matter with you?' the bash-shawish bellowed in his ear.

That voice Gadein understood.

'I did what the guard commander told me. I tried not to show my private parts, but it's difficult. Sir,' he added, regaining consciousness.

'What guard commander, lunatic? What is difficult?'

'For the lashing.' Gadein's face was dull with fear, his eyes hooded. He knew that he had done something wrong, but not what it was.

The bash-shawish looked closely at him for several seconds. He relaxed again into officiality.

'My lord, this man is very stupid. Someone had told him he would be lashed here. He meant no harm.'

Bimbashi Courage roared with laughter, in which was a measure of relief. Already he began to shape the story for telling to Sister Ellis at the hospital: his fear, his bravery turned to ridicule by anti-climax but bravery none the less, the child-like stupidity of the Bunawi shaken by Masterson from their trees. He came out of it, he thought, rather well. He surveyed Gadein with a complacent and paternal interest.

'Lashing' presently, perhaps,' he said jovially. 'First we hear talk. Carry on, bash-shawish.'

Driver Byrne was marched in by Sergeant Mann, Bimbashi Oakes's platoon sergeant. He looked limp and pasty, and gave his evidence in a complaining monotone. Musa Faragella was brought. His jibbah was creased to perfection. He stamped his iron-tipped heels on the concrete floor, and his voice dripped honey. Driver Byrne had but his natural talent for lying. Musa was an artist, polishing the truth only the little that was necessary.

Bimbashi Courage looked sympathetically at Gadein, less sympathetically at Byrne. He disliked Byrne in any event for his whine, his slovenliness, his inefficiency as a mechanic, judging him, unconsciously, by harsher standards than he would have used to one of his own kind, or to one as remote from himself as Gadein.

'Did you call this nafar "flicking wog"?'

'No, sir,' said Driver Byrne defiantly.

'Are you sure?'

'May I be struck dead, sir,' said Byrne, dropping his eyes. Indeed, he was not sure, since he often called nafars flicking wogs.

'I'm sorry, Byrne, that I prefer to believe a Bunawi rather than an Englishman,' Bimbashi Courage said stiffly. Forgotten were the missing tool-kits in an upsurge of chivalry. What were they but children, innocent boys trusting in his care?

'Nafar Gadein good man?' he asked the bash-shawish.

'Very good, my lord.'

'He very clean man,' said Bimbashi Courage, looking approvingly at Gadein's sandals, his belt, his emma. 'But hit people not good. If you have complaint, tell officer. Understood?'

'Yes, indeed, my lord,' said Mohammed Ahmed on Gadein's behalf, and translated. A look of bewilderment passed over Gadein's face. He thought slowly. Not until ten minutes later, outside, did he fully comprehend, and the bewildered look changed to relief, to ecstasy. When the bash-shawish found him again, in a quiet place behind the Prophylactic Centre, his feet were moving involuntarily in the steps of a muted dance.

'Well, you nearly made a mess of things, didn't you?' said Mohammed Ahmed, grimly humorous.

Gadein's face, which had been lit from within, clouded again. He was filled with horror of his own stupidity, with self-distrust, fear of the spirits which tripped his every step. He writhed before Mohammed Ahmed, and the spirits, in gratitude and worship.

'You cleaned your sandals quite well,' said Mohammed Ahmed. 'The lord bimbashi has taken a liking to you. He wants a driver for his truck. I said you would do as well as anyone else. Now remember what I've told you. Keep yourself clean. Don't ask questions. And as you'll miss parades, you can report to me for drill twice a day.'

'My lord . . .'

'You call a bash-shawish "sir", not "my lord",' said

Mohammed Ahmed patiently. 'Now get back to your platoon.'

Gadein ran, singing. Then he remembered that, at certain seasons, the spirits disapproved of singing, and struck down revellers with malevolent ill-will. He touched with the tips of apologetic fingers the tyre pressure gauge in his pocket, and walked quietly and modestly.

V

THERE IS NO WORD FOR WEALTH IN THE LANGUAGE of Laweyn, only a word for goats. To the travelling trader, however, or to the soldier on active service, goats are an inconvenient currency. Iron hoe blades, which produce wealth from the soil, form a portable and acceptable alternative. A hoe blade is worth one goat, a hundred goats one land.

Gadein, trusting neither government clerks nor pieces of paper, drew fifty piastres of his pay every week, and, when he had made necessary deductions for boot polish, blanco, the black lead which he lavished on the tyres of his lorry, and Musa's entertainment at the canteen, invested the rest in hoe blades. He managed to save a hoe blade a week, and, since there was no method of transferring hoe blades from Buna to Laweyn, kept them at the bottom of his kit-bag.

No letters passed between himself and Laweyn, for there was no post, and no one to read or write them. Gadein did not know whether Abu Butan and Kama's father had broken off his engagement, but he continued collecting hoe blades. Without a wife, he could not work his land. He had no particular affection for Kama, but he

was familiar with her, and he had thought of her as his future wife for several months, and therefore his hoard of hoe blades continued to represent Kama.

But wealth in Laweyn, as distinct from what wealth can buy, is abhorrent to the spirits, and it is customary to celebrate any access of greatness by giving a meat feast. A man who gives many meat feasts, though he bankrupt himself, remains rich in the esteem of his fellows, and, perhaps, of the spirits.

When Gadein was appointed to be driver of the lord bimbashi's own truck, he took one hoe blade from his store, and said to Musa, who knew everything, 'Where can I buy a goat?'

Musa, who should have been getting ready for parade, was practising balancing a stick on the point of his chin, in hope that he would be able to persuade simple men to bet him that he couldn't.

'I know a man,' he said absent-mindedly, hovering with outstretched arms beneath the stick. 'What do you want a goat for?'

'To give a feast.'

Musa put the stick away and became interested.

'Shall I come to the feast?' he asked, putting his arm affectionately round Gadein's shoulders.

'Everyone in the hut must come. It is because I'm the lord bimbashi's driver.'

'But you fool, they don't pay you any more,' Musa said indignantly.

Gadein's gentle face took on the confident lines of his brother Kattei's. He had, indeed, already tried to put two men on a charge, and not even the bash-shawish's rebuke had convinced him that he could not.

'I am the lord bimbashi's driver,' he repeated, in a tone which gave warning of offended dignity.

Musa shrugged. He sought income, not honour, but if Gadein was prepared to give a feast, he did not wish to discourage him.

'All right. Give me the goat money.'

Gadein polished the hoe blade on his sleeve, and handed it over with a certain reluctance.

'What's this?' asked Musa, spitting.

'A goat.'

'You're a goat. I want fifty piastres.'

'But you must exchange the hoe blade for the goat,' Gadein explained. He was used by now to Musa's eccentricities.

'Now look here,' said Musa, marking his words with the hoe blade on Gadein's head, 'goats cost fifty piastres. That is, if you want a good one. You bought this for about twenty. I can sell it for five.'

'A hoe blade is always a goat,' Gadein said stiffly, rubbing his head. He generally trusted Musa, but sometimes remembered the tool kit trick.

'Listen, goat-boy,' Musa dribbled a little with exasperation. 'A man who sells goats wants money, not hoe blades. A man who buys hoe blades must make his commission by selling them again. If he buys and he sells at the same price, how does he live?'

'By God, on his farm.'

'By God, you're a fool,' said Musa, dancing about, 'If a man's a trader, he doesn't have a farm. What do traders do in your village?'

'There are no traders in Lawāyn,' said Gadein simply. Then, since he was honest, added, 'Except an Arab man who comes with beads for the girls. We beat him if we catch him.'

'By God?'

'By God.'

Musa hawked and, with great deliberation, spat. He neither understood, nor wished to. The episode confirmed his opinion of Laweyn, and his own self-esteem.

'All right, I'll buy you a goat. But you'll pay me back fifty piastres. In money, not hoe blades.'

Gadein sorrowfully returned the hoe blade to his kit-bag, wishing that he still lived in a world where a hoe blade was always a goat. Then he remembered that he was giving what amounted to a two and a half goat feast, and he too recovered his self-esteem.

The goat cost thirty-five piastres, which left fifteen piastres for Musa's commission. It arrived, self-willed, in Musa's father's taxi, and Gadein cut its throat according to the ritual laid down, in the wasteland between the barracks and the harimat lines.

When he had skinned it and set aside a leg for the spirits, he said shyly, 'In Laweyn, every man has a blood brother.'

Musa spat non-committally.

'I was never able to find a blood brother. Musa, would you have me?'

'How much does it cost?' Musa asked cautiously.

'Nothing. I've bought the goat. We must eat the heart together, then you are my heart, and I am yours.'

'And whose is the goat's?' Musa said, grinning.

'We will have eaten the goat's,' Gadein answered seriously.

Musa kicked him affectionately.

'By God, goat-boy, you're a fool,' he said, laughing; then his eyes filled with tears, and they embraced. They ate the goat's heart, swearing to help and be true to each other, to attend each other's family feasts, and to avoid forbidden degrees of kinship in marriage, as if they were

true brothers. Gadein's face became long and solemn. Musa wept copiously, and for several hours was deeply moved.

The remainder of the goat was cooked on a fire of camel-thorn. All came who would, and there was singing, drumming on tin washbowls, and much laughter. Gadein danced the dance of the young men after a successful hunting, and basked for the first time in the warmth of public applause.

Then Bimbashi Oakes arrived, being orderly officer.

'What you do?' he demanded indignantly.

Gadein paused, frozen in the middle of his dance. It was Musa who spoke up.

'My lord, we are eating.'

'You mustn't eat here.'

'But my lord,' said Gadein, thinking perhaps Bimbashi Oakes had not understood, 'this is not a government goat, it is a civilian goat.'

'Chatterbox,' said Bimbashi Oakes, peering heron-like through the flame-lit darkness. 'Shawish, take names. Office in morning. Go away now.'

In this manner Gadein learnt that the English did not like feasting, either. As for Bimbashi Oakes, he was confirmed in his belief that the Bunawi were dirty, unhygienic, greedy and ill-disciplined.

★ ★ ★

But nothing could take away Gadein's delight in his new truck. It was a sleek thing painted the pale gold of evening sunlight, its body stripped of all superfluities, which Bimbashi Courage drove over the desert flats at seventy miles an hour. When Bimbashi Courage was not driving the truck, it rested in workshops, where English mechanics prepared it so that the little needle might

flicker to nearer eighty miles an hour. Bimbashi Courage loved it, and Gadein loved it more, for he loved the thing itself whereas Bimbashi Courage loved only what it could achieve.

Gadein was not allowed to drive it. Indeed, the thought of driving it made him afraid. He could, however, squat beside it for hours, watching the mechanics perform their rites. He could clean it, polish anything polishable, black-lead the tyres. Sometimes a mechanic allowed him to clean the sparking plugs or top up the batteries. He did this with reverence.

At other times he sat beside Bimbashi Courage, holding tightly on to his emma, his face smarting from the dust-laden wind of their progress, as they raced for mile after mile across the hard, flat surface of the desert, or lolled in the driving seat, arm posed negligently on the door, while Bimbashi Courage paid calls.

On the sixth evening of his ownership, Bimbashi Courage drove him to the hospital. They parked in a cul-de-sac of rutted dust, beside which eucalyptus leaves rattled drily as the evening breeze took them. From across the long main street, with its tarmac centre for cars and its broad dirt lanes for asses, camels and pedestrians, came the roar and babble of the suk. Down by the river a spinster hippopotamus bellowed sadly, solitary now, mourning her kind who had once been lords of the place.

At a side gate in the high, mudbrick wall, Sister Ellis stood, her face dark against the whiteness of her dress.

'This is Gadein,' Bimbashi Courage told her affably in English. 'If you say *keyf halak* to him, he'll be very pleased.'

Gadein grinned at mention of his name, and surveyed Sister Ellis shyly from beneath dropping lashes.

'*Keyf halak*, Gadein,' Sister Ellis said prettily. 'I say, Tommy, your bey's been ragging matron about unauthorised visitors.'

'I suppose he'd like to be an unauthorised visitor himself.'

'Are you sure he hasn't been?'

Feeling quite alone, Bimbashi Courage swung Sister Ellis masterfully to him, and kissed her. They walked away arm in arm.

'Wait a little, Gadein.' Bimbashi Courage did not look round.

'Yes, my lord,' said Gadein eagerly, saluting the lord bimbashi's back.

The nights were cold after the ardent sun. Gadein took his greatcoat from the tool-locker, and buttoned it up to his neck. It was stained with oil from the locker, but Bimbashi Courage did not like to see it lying in the truck. From the other locker he took a tattered blanket, which he draped over his head, wrapping his emma in cloth and laying it on the seat beside him. He was no longer a smart soldier, but a ragamuffin native boy, thankful for warmth.

Being unable to read, Gadein had to think. He began by thinking about Sister Ellis. He did not envy Bimbashi Courage possession of her, but envied the warmth of the girls' huts, and wondered how Sister Ellis could look so old when her breasts were so small. He was virgin, the thought of women did not trouble him except as an inexplicable unease, but he considered a woman as frankly as he did the milk-bag of a goat.

Sister Ellis led him to think of the hoe blades making his kit-bag heavy, and of the goat which could not be bought with a hoe blade, and he started up in sudden fear, his hair prickling, lest he be stranded for ever in a

world where his saving of hoe blades was always out-distanced by the cost of goats. He had seen in the hills the men of such a world, homeless and without folk. They owned no seed to sow when the first tender leaves of the habil tree marked the coming of spring, nor land to break with the long-handled hoes. They had no wives, no sons and daughters, to work the land. They came to a village and were received hospitably enough, though with nudgings and talk. Then they were told to go, but lingered, and presently they were made to go, with shouting and showers of stones. Sometimes they were found dead on the hill tracks, and their spirits haunted that place, malevolent, unresting.

Gadein shivered and touched his charm.

An hour passed. His face became grey with cold and his teeth chattered. He thought now only of cold, which was in itself a thought of Laweyn, where it was never cold. A lit window in the hospital above lowered its eyelid, leaving him to a darkness full of unknown sound. The rattle of brittle leaves he knew, a donkey's bray; but there were sudden shrieks, and quiet, secret sounds in the trees' shadow, where spirits moved invisible who could not be appeased because they were unknown. He clutched the blanket across his face, seeking insensibility. The tyre pressure gauge was reassuring in his pocket, it stood for Bimbashi Courage, and soon in its powerful protection he slept.

He slept deeply. A new sound insinuated itself into his dreams, though he resisted. He was in darkness, and nameless ones came running. He tried to run, the footsteps were coming closer, but it was forbidden. He strained with the effort to move, sweating and crying; and sat up with a desperate grunt to find his chest tight against the steering wheel, behind the wall the sound of

running footsteps. He poked his head tortoise-like from the blanket, skin pricking.

From the side gate a figure came, white in the pale light, and looking to right and left, vanished in the darkness of the eucalyptus trees.

'Gadein!'

Gadein let out a sigh of released tension. It was Bimbashi Courage's voice.

'My lord?' he said, sleepily saluting the eucalyptus trees.

'You not see me. Understand?'

'I cannot see you, my lord.'

Bimbashi Courage swore at his own inadequate Arabic and that thick woolly head.

'You not see me. I not here. If anyone speak you, I not here.' His voice was urgent.

There was a pause.

'Understand', my lord, said Gadein, saluting again.

'Oh, God, what a fool!' groaned Bimbashi Courage in English.

But Gadein, fully awake now, did indeed understand. He had seen his brother Tula come running many times from the girls' huts, he knew what would follow.

There were voices on the other side of the wall. Gadein, his hand shaking with terror, pulled the starter of Bimbashi Courage's truck. The truck was powerful, but Bimbashi Courage was in danger and would protect him. He knew what he must do.

A faint 'Oh, God,' came from the trees; but the voices were too near for protest.

Powerful headlights cut arcs in the darkness. The engine purred quietly. The truck leapt backward, and stopped with a protesting jar. 'Handbrake!' Gadein said aloud, placating the domestic spirits. There was always

something in the rite he forgot, and Bimbashi Courage's truck was very terrifying.

He tried again, careful to forget nothing. Elbows out like a nervous rider, hands gripping the steering wheel as if in the strength of his grip lay safety, bolt upright on the slippery seat, he began to edge the truck backwards down the narrow lane.

'Here, I say, there's a truck starting.' The words, in English, were incomprehensible, but the voice was near.

Another voice, female, 'You must stop it, then, Captain Roberts.'

Gadein looked behind him as he reversed down the lane, but the sight of the wall, so near, so solid, unnerved him. He gripped the steering wheel harder, staring rigidly in front, trusting to the English magic. The truck moved by starts, as he alternately pressed and took his foot off the accelerator. Trickle of sweat ran down his forehead. The front wing delicately scraped the wall, and he jerked the wheel round. There was a tearing jar, and before he could think, the rear of the truck was heading for the eucalyptus trees. He jerked again, and again. He did not want to go far, only far enough to lead pursuit away from Bimbashi Courage, but that far he must go.

A man came from the gate, shouting in English, then, as he saw Gadein, in pidgin Arabic.

'You, boy!' he roared terrifyingly. 'Stop, stop!'

Gadein stared hard at nothing. The man was English, and an officer, it was a physical effort to resist his command, but Gadein pressed his foot down harder on the accelerator. The truck roared backward, a taxi hooted wildly in the main road behind him, and Gadein stalled the engine just in time, the truck's tail sticking out of the cul-de-sac.

'Lunatic, buffalo, camel,' bellowed the taxi-driver, welcoming a break in the monotony of driving; then saw the English, backfired, and vanished in a cloud of blue smoke.

Gadein sat demurely, settling his emma upon his head, for without it he was not a soldier.

'You, boy,' roared the English officer, puffing slightly. His face was redder than his hair. He wore the red and black lettered armband of the military police.

'My lord?' said Gadein respectfully, as if he had noticed the man for the first time. He was trembling, but triumphant.

'You speak English?'

'No, my lord.'

'Damn! Matron, he doesn't speak English.'

'Then you had better speak Arabic, Captain Roberts.'

'Yes,' said Captain Roberts thoughtfully, and looked at Gadein.

Two other men, wearing red police caps, began to search the truck, turning over petrol tins and spare tyre, looking in the tool-locker.

'Do you know what you're searching for?' matron asked.

'No, ma'am.'

Her eye, terrible in the headlights, took them between wind and water, and they withdrew together into the darkness.

'Captain Roberts,' matron said, 'if you cannot give sensible orders, please give no orders at all. You've already allowed this officer to escape through your stupidity, after I've given perfectly clear instructions. Now perhaps you'd better leave matters to me.'

'Yes, matron,' said Captain Roberts, saluting in spite of himself, and stepped meekly into darkness with his men.

Matron surveyed Gadein from his emma to the oil stains on his greatcoat.

'You speak no English?'

Gadein stared in front of him.

Matron bit her strait lower lip, but she was brave.

'Who your officer?' Her tongue tripped over the unaccustomed syllables of pidgin Arabic; grey lined face warily colouring in the headlights' glare.

'My lady?'

'What you do here?'

A puzzled though deferential frown showed itself on Gadein's forehead.

'My lady, a taxi was coming along the main road. I had to stop until it was past. Then your lord came to me.'

Matron pursed her lips. She knew when she was beaten.

'Captain Roberts,' she said, 'perhaps you three men are capable of taking this vehicle's number, and making a complaint to its unit?'

'Yes, Inatron. Certainly, matron.'

She scorned to spy on their bumbling, but marched away, a small, upright figure, to discover which of her Sisters had been entertaining officers.

When Bimbashi Courage emerged from his hiding place, he found Gadein shaking with laughter, and humming a little song of triumph.

'Very, *very* good, my lord,' Gadein said, saluting.

Bimbashi Courage grunted dismally. He looked farther ahead than Gadein, to whom the morrow was always an eternity away. Only thus, in Laweyn, could life be endured.

★ ★ ★

Gadein stood on the lion-skin in Maserson Bey's office, looking stiffly down a wildcat's throat. The ritual had

been terrifying, but he felt strong in Bimbashi Courage's protection. A number of people talked in English, and their words were not translated, but Bimbashi Courage was there, speaking for him.

'I entirely fail to understand,' Masterson Bey said vindictively, cocking and uncocking the toy pistol he kept on his desk as a paperweight, 'how a company's so ill-conducted that a driver can take out the company commander's truck and cruise about the town without anybody knowing.'

He paused expectantly.

Courage stood stiffly to attention, face pale, lips set. 'You have no suggestions to offer, Courage?'

'No, sir.'

'Very well. I have never had cause to doubt an officer's word. I don't propose to start now. Your company clearly needs an example. I shall make an example of this nafar. A month's confinement to barracks. Sixty days' stoppage of pay. Dismiss.'

Courage and Gadein walked back to the company lines together; or rather, Gadein walked respectfully behind Bimbashi Courage.

Courage sought for something to say, for something he could say in Arabic. The soft footfalls behind unaccountably irritated him.

'Gadein.'

'My lord?' Gadein ran eagerly a few steps to catch up. His voice was reverent.

'Damn. Nothing.' How explain, without an interpreter, that, at whatever cost, Sister Ellis must be protected?

By the officers' living quarters he paused, needing a drink.

'Gadein, take money.'

He unbuttoned the breast pocket of his bush-jacket,

damp with sweat, and, pulling out limp notes, thrust them at Gadein, dropping his eyes.

'No, my lord. That isn't possible.'

'Why?'

Gadein grinned with embarrassment, shrugged, and clicked his tongue.

A little fear entered Courage's mind. After all, he understood them so little.

'You no say anything?'

Gadein clicked again, the nervousness this time from hurt pride.

'No, my lord.'

'God damn and blast it,' said Bimbashi Courage in English, hating himself and Gadein, then walked quick'y into his room and slammed the door.

Gadein shambled back to the barrack hut, as he had once returned to Kama, without his bells. He understood both incidents only in the terms of malevolent spirits. He had sought eagerly to help, and the spirits had visited their frustration upon him, despite even the protection of Bimbashi Courage. There was nothing to be done about it. He thought, therefore, about sixty days stoppage of pay relative to the price of goats.

Two months' pay meant twenty goats, which was a fifth of Kama's bride-price. For sacrificing a fifth of his claim to possess Kama, he had been offered money by Bimbashi Courage. Gadein saw the goats clearly, ring-straked, speckled and black, but he could not see the money. Besides, Bimbashi Courage was an Englishman. Masterson Bey held his orderly rooms in the evening, believing that parade time should not be wasted; and there were few men in the barrack hut when Gadein got there. They were more charitable than Laweyn, if less interested.

'Well, Gadein, did you get a lashing this time?'

'Sixty days' without pay.'

'By God!' Solemn whistles, and everyone thought of its effect upon him. Sixty days stoppage of pay, to men with wives to buy, was a more serious matter than sixty lashes.

'What were you doing with the truck?' Musa asked, his eyes calculating.

'I wanted to drive it.'

'Down by the hospital?'

'It's quiet there.'

'Has that bastard paid you to keep quiet about it, or is he too mean?'

'Shut up, Musa.' Gadein rose threateningly.

'All right, all right,' said Musa pacifically; but tucked away the memory for future use.

So they left him. They were sympathetic only because, seeing everything subjectively, they felt the punishment as it would have affected themselves. When they realised that they had not been punished, they forgot their sympathy.

Gadein would have slept, except that he had to report hourly to the guardroom, so he went on thinking about goats. He looked out once or twice at the sun to see if it was time, and then slouched across the square, walking apologetically, as he had done before he became a soldier and trusted in the English magic. A voice hailed him.

'You! Nafar!'

'Yes, sir.'

'You march across the square,' said the bash-shawish, still at a distance, 'not lounge across it as if you were seeking lost goats. Have you lost some goats?'

Gadein was not surprised that this powerful man read his thoughts.

'Yes, sir,' he said.

Nor was Mohammed Ahmed surprised that Gadein was thinking about goats. Long, long ago, so long ago that it was in another existence, he had come from a village himself.

'There are no goats in the army,' he said decisively, 'except you. What do you mean by taking that truck out?'

Gadein stammered. He would have liked the bash-shawish to think well of him. But he said nothing.

Mohammed Ahmed looked at him with a certain approval. He knew most of what went on in the company.

'Good,' he said, and patted Gadein's shoulder. 'Don't do it again. Now march properly. Step off smartly with the left foot. By the fra-ont! Quick! Mar!'

He watched the gangling figure turn once more to a self-respecting soldier; and as the muezzin began his evening call, hurried to wash face, hands and feet before reporting himself, in a soldierly manner, to the One God, the All-Powerful, the Compassionate.

VI

WHEN THE COMPANY WAS ORDERED ON ACTIVE service to North Africa, Abdulla Effendi developed stomach trouble, and Bimbashi Oakes discovered a fund of reminiscence about the tram-lines in Tobruk.

The news was brought to the barrack hut, as usual, by Musa Faragella.

'We're to be on supplies,' he said, exulting. He had no authority for the statement, but it was desirable, and therefore true.

Two days later, their lorries were taken away.

'We're being turned into an infantry company,' said Musa Faragella from the depths of gloom. 'There's a battle going on in the north. The English are being beaten. They're afraid they'll be turned out of Egypt and Palestine and Buna, they're sending the best men into battle to be killed, so that only women and children will be left to oppose them. I have this from my cousin in hospital, also from the suk.'

'By God?'

'By God.'

Two men from Musa's hut attempted to desert, and Gadein began to take a particular pride in cleaning his rifle.

They were played out of barracks by the band, and their salute was taken by an old, crazy general who had once quelled a mutiny of their fathers, armed only with a swagger cane. His spirit was as fiery as ever, he would cheerfully have led them, still with a swagger cane, against tanks and dive-bombers; but his tired body twitched with the malaria germs of two continents, and he could show his love for them only by standing rigidly at the salute, though his body cried out in agony.

'Silly old bastard,' said Musa. 'See him leave a soft job to chase Germans.'

Musa was in a bad temper, because he had had to leave half his accumulated kit behind. Gadein, distrustful, had left his hoe blades; but he had made a small sacrifice of goat's liver to the spirits who guard travellers, and bought a little butter, with which he anointed his head.

'This man's filthy,' roared Bimbashi Oakes, already overwrought, at inspection, and had him taken to be scrubbed.

They were packed into the wooden-seated carriages of

the train, twelve with full equipment to a compartment, and for three days steamed slowly along the single track, ruled like an engineer's dream across the grey-dun desert, under the pitiless sun. Towards evening of the third day, they embarked on flat barges towed behind two river steamers, slept wrapped in their blankets under the brilliant stars, and forbore to trail their feet in the cool water for fear of crocodiles.

Then they were at the end of the world which any man knew. Angry, coffee-coloured officials in tarbushes shouted orders at them in scarcely recognisable Arabic. They were ordered into a train, and out of it. They were marched into the desert and ordered to bed down, and when they were comfortable, they were called up again and marched to a transit camp which was full, so they bedded down in the soiled desert behind the mud huts.

In the morning they huddled in desolate groups about the compound until Mohammed Ahmed, without orders, held a parade and inspection of shattering severity.

'I'd like to know where the officers are,' complained Musa, checked for dust in his rifle barrel.

The officers had spent the night at a grand hotel of forbidding splendour, with malachite bidets in every bedroom, and plush curtains heavy with the dust of dead Pharaohs.

Now Bimbashi Courage was fighting the company's battle by telephone. No one was expecting them. No one had orders to forward them northward. G.H.Q., looking eagerly beyond Alamein to Fuka, to Mersa, even to Sollun, had no thought to spare for rearward glance. When Bimbashi Courage produced his papers, the coffee-coloured officials said contemptuously, 'Those papers are from Buna. We do not take orders from Buna.'

In the afternoon the civilian express left for the north,

a sleek white train with compartments air-conditioned, sleeping berths, and aproned French chefs.

Bimbashi Courage marched his company to the station, and ordered them into this train. The soldiers, grinning, bounced up and down on the cushioned seats, and festooned the corridors with lavatory paper. Officials buzzed angrily about the platform, between the telephone and Bimbashi Courage.

'My men are in this train, and they're staying in this train,' said Bimbashi Courage, who had passed beyond anger to the blind patience of despair. 'The sooner it pulls out, the sooner you can run another.'

In a last stand, a ticket collector was despatched, looking unhappily at the rifles, to demand two hundred and fifty tickets.

'Send the bill to General Alexander,' said Bimbashi Courage courteously.

So they arrived amid the convulsion of Cairo. Gadein, leaning from the tight-packed window, saw tall white buildings seeming to sway against the sky, and was sick. They changed into a lesser train, and pedlars hung about the carriages, crying their wares, fountain pens, combs and mirrors, charm bracelets, and cheap knives. The village boys stared open-mouthed, and the pedlars passed the word, 'They're Bunawi. They'll buy anything. They don't know.'

Musa Faragella's eye glinted. He picked up a fountain pen from the nearest tray.

'By God, it's beautiful.'

• He removed the cap, and viewed the silvery nib with wonder.

'See, Gadein.'

• He passed it to Gadein behind him, who examined it.

'Let Mohammed Abbas see,' said Musa, taking another

fountain pen. 'Let them all see. If they see, they will buy. It is surely magic.'

Presently everyone in the carriage had a fountain pen. The train began to move. The pedlars, unpaid, cried pitcously, blasphemously, obscenely, for their wares.

Musa Faragella hung triumphant from the step, taunting them.

'We are Bunawi. We'll buy anything. Yah, flicking Egyptians!'



'You are a buffalo,' said Shawish Abdullahi, senior shawish in charge of Bimbashi Oakes's platoon. He threw a rock at Gadein's sandalled feet.

'Stand still when I talk to you,' said Shawish Abdullahi. 'You are a cow, a goat, a camel, a dog. Now put some oil in your gear-box as the English sergeant tells you. Hurry! Hurry!'

He expedited Gadein's progress with further rocks, which Gadein did not resent. Shawish Abdullahi, more used to camels than to lorries, was known to be a short-tempered man, because for seventeen years he had awaited promotion to bash-shawish. He still hoped that if he threw enough rocks he would gain a crown to wear above his three stripes. He aimed badly, and was popular. His drivers gladly suffered the rock-throwing in the cause of Shawish Abdullahi's deserved promotion.

Shawish Abdullahi observed from the corner of his eye the cloud of dust which heralded Bimbashi Oakes's approach. He redoubled his efforts.

'Shawish Abdullahi!'

'My lord?'

'Shawish Abdullahi, he must not do that,' said Bimbashi

Oakes, who sometimes became confused between the second and third personal pronouns.

'By God, no, my lord,' said Shawish Abdullahi with reinforced indignation, and went on throwing rocks.

Bimbashi Oakes groaned, and, feeling that the world was too much with him, scuffed on his way.

It was the morning of their departure for Libya. The company had been remobilised. Gadein had a lorry again. His neat jibbah had been taken away and replaced by a battledress, the jacket and trousers of which did not match. He wore a steel helmet on the back of his head like a halo, indicating that he was, by order, in a state of battle-preparedness.

According to the operation order which Bimbashi Oakes had confidently read, through an interpreter, to his shawishya the previous evening, a Platoon would move at 0530 hours to pick up Italian prisoners-of-war and NAAFI goods for transport to Tobruk.

At 0600 hours Musa said to Gadein, 'My lorry won't start, and the self-start no longer says anything. You must give me a tow.'

'I haven't a tow-rope.

'Then you must bring your lorry behind mine, and give me a push. That's how the English sergeant does it.'

Gadein climbed obediently into his cab and started the engine. He circled in a wide sweep, raising a cloud of dust, and came behind Musa's lorry with the panache to be expected of one doing what an English sergeant did. Musa's lorry jerked forward, stopped, and Gadein hit it again on the rebound. Musa's lorry started; but Gadein's had to be removed to workshops for repairs to the radiator.

It was now 0800 hours, and Bimbashi Oakes was on his

way to mobile company headquarters to explain why A Platoon, like B and C platoons, had remained where it was.

Shawish Abdullahi indulged in a passion of rock-throwing. Sergeant Mann, uncomfortable because he was on parade and had to wear a shirt, went from lorry to lorry with his usual air of competent nursemaid to the helpless young. He was a solidly built man, burnt all over to a rich mahogany, who spent much spare time in the drivers' huts, learning their tongue and their ways. In the platoon he was esteemed only a little less than Bashshawish Mohammed Ahmed. His English colleagues, however, thought him bomb-happy.

'Sergeant, the petrol does not come.'

'Blow into the tank, then. Look, like this.'

'Musa Faragella said that when the petrol did not come in his father's taxi, he unwound this screw on the carburettor.'

'Musa Faragella's father's taxi is not an army lorry,' said Sergeant Mann without bitterness. 'You leave the carburettor alone.'

He readjusted it. The petrol came.

'Thank you, sergeant. You are very, very clever.'

'Don't talk so much, and get in your lorry. You're on parade.'

At 1200 hours the first lorries moved off in ragged convoy, Bimhashi Oakes, with modified pride, at their head. The drivers cheered, happy to be alive, to be men driving a lorry, to be going towards the war, away from parades in the mobilisation centre on the arid plain.

Gadein had many charms suitably disposed about the cab. In his arm bracelet was the paper written by Mohammed Ahmed. Behind the driving mirror were three grasses twisted in the way which sometimes averts

evil. The tyre pressure gauge was in his trouser pocket. He took his hands from the steering wheel, and waved with the rest. In his excitement he stamped his foot hard down on the accelerator, and watched with helpless wonder the lorry in front approaching him at incredible speed. His mind was still five minutes behind, the grin of triumph still on his lips. There was a jarring crash. He sat there, foot still on the accelerator, hands off the wheel, grinning, while his lorry ground doggedly away at the truck in front.

In this manner the spirits caused him to be towed ignominiously six hundred miles from the Nile Delta to Tobruk.

VII

MUSA FARAFELLA COUNTED HIS GAINS IN THE uncertain firelight.

'One pound. Two pounds. Three pounds. And forty-seven piastres. That's good, for one week. In a year, when we've been on supplies, I shall be rich.'

Gadein clicked his tongue. It meant envy, rebuke, uncertainty, sadness. It saved him the trouble of thinking exactly what he did mean.

They sat by Musa's lorry on the plain above Tobruk. Across the narrow road was a minefield, inadequately guarded by sagging barbed wire. One driver had blown himself up on it, and been buried. He was already forgotten, like the men who had once driven the wrecked tanks and lorries which lay about them.

When they had arrived that afternoon, Gadein had jumped eagerly from his lorry, rifle and bayonet at the

ready; but there was no war, only the wreckage of war, and scattered camps squatting like tinkers among the minefields.

The town, too, was disappointing. Rumours had flown. It was rich. It was as great as Buna. No, Bimbashi Who Moves Like the Wind had said it was as great as Cairo. There were rich Italians living there, and women. But it was only a mess of twisted steel and smashed, stained concrete, hanging above the peacock sea.

Musa, who had stolen some NAAFI beer and had a hangover, began complaining as soon as they arrived. No huts had been built for them. There were ~~no~~ even tents. It was cold. The cooks had not prepared tea. Musa squatted in the dust, cap comforter drawn over his ears to meet the upturned collar of his greatcoat, while Gadein drew two men's rations from the supply lorry, poured petrol on ~~and~~ heaped in an empty petrol tin and lit it, cooked stew of bully beef, sesame oil and groundnuts. He made a nest of blankets and water tins beside the fire for Musa and himself.

'By God, you're like a woman,' Musa had complained venomously; but now he was warm, he had eaten most of the stew, and was counting his money. Everything else could await tomorrow. Tomorrow he would build a hut. Tomorrow he would make himself comfortable. Tomorrow he would look after his lorry. There is always tomorrow. Tomorrow, in the time of the apricots; which is never.

'You'll get leprosy if you're not careful,' Gadein said.

'Why will I get leprosy? What's this talk about leprosy?' Musa chose to be peevish.

'He who steals gets leprosy. You may die.'

Musa laughed, but looked about him with a certain apprehension. He believed in nothing and everything.

'I don't steal. I was carrying tea and sugar. There were little holes in the sacks and I swept the leakings off the floorboards. The Libyans don't care, as long as it's sugar.'

Gadein was silent. It irked him that Musa, who did so little to propitiate the spirits or even his own God, could become rich, while he met only with disaster. But the spirits were like that.

'This is all nonsense about leprosy. Isn't it?' Musa's soft voice was appealing. Gadein knew that his eyes would be filling with tears. Yet Musa must have a magic which he himself did not possess.

'Perhaps it's all right for you. Not for me.'

'It would be all right for you, too,' Musa said, regaining confidence. 'But you're afraid.'

'Yes, I'm afraid,' Gadein said sadly.

'By God, you're a goat. Don't you want to make any money?'

'I want a bride-price. But I don't want leprosy.'

'What do you buy a girl for?' Musa asked contemptuously. 'I won't buy a girl. They buy me.'

Gadein dipped his clean hand into the mess tin and fished thoughtfully for a morsel of bully-beef. None was left.

'How do you till your land without a wife?' he asked, not really caring.

'I haven't got any land. What do you want to till land for? You can drive now. Why don't you drive a taxi? That's what I shall do. But I shall also go into politics. My cousin, Abdulla Effendi, has promised me a place. There are no taxis in Laweyn, or any politics.' Gadein spoke sorrowfully from far away, from another world.

'By God?'

'By God.'

'What do you do, then?'

Gadein sighed. What did they do? In spring, when the egrets came to tell of the following rain, they went out, man and wife together, and cleared the stubble fields. Smoke from the stubble fires mingled with smoke from beneath the cooking pots, and women were rich with child. Then they rose in the cool dawn and sowed, breaking the earth's crisp crust with the familiar hoe, working without rest through the morning heat. Then there was the aching stiffness of weeding, and a day at the hunt, and the goats bore their kids. Presently there was harvest, and feasting, and time to laugh. Time to laugh if harvest was good, time to laugh if it was bad, for though children might die there was always tomorrow. What did they do, who drove no taxis and had no politics?

'Nothing,' he said humbly, and began drumming on the iron water-container beside him. He touched it lightly at first with only his finger-tips, then with the full palm, rhythm and counter-rhythm, delicate, syncopated half-beats which throbbed through the darkness.

He sang in a high, nasal voice:

*I have filled three baskets with grain, food for a child.
I have filled four baskets with grain, and one child more.
Crow, Koko and Kwodi, you will grow strong and fat,
You will fill twelve baskets with grain when you are
men.*

Other soldiers beside their fires took up the beat, and sang of far-off villages.

'There's one consolation,' said Bimbashi Oakes indignantly, squatting on his camp-bed among the squalor of the officers' lines. 'The nafs are enjoying themselves, if we aren't.'

A rock landed between Gadein and Musa, scattering

the fire, ricocheting harshly from the water-tank, breaking the delicate rhythm.

'Everybody on parade!' shouted Shawish Abdullahi. 'Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Everybody on parade.'

They gathered, grumbling; shapeless figures huddled in blankets and greatcoats against the cold.

'Everybody must fill up with petrol immediately. See to your oil and tyres. Dismiss now. Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!'

'Shawish Abdullahi, it's too dark. There is no petrol. I can't see the dipstick for oil. We must do this tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow at dawn you must work. Hurry, now! Hurry!'

Rocks whirled through the darkness.

'My tummy feels bad,' said Musa fretfully. 'You must do my lorry for me. You can take it out tomorrow if you like.'

'Does it feel like leprosy?'

'Of course it doesn't, goat-boy.' Musa laughed uneasily. 'You'll make some money, too, if you're smart.'

Gadein breathed out a triple sigh, and went absent-mindedly to seek petrol. Half of him remained in Laweyn, honour restored, children playing about his feet. There was no laughter in the army. No one knew Laweyn's jokes. How they would have laughed in the seniors' hut at mistaking water for petrol in the darkness, and filling Musa's tank with it. Shawish Abdullahi only threw rocks.

★ ★ ★

Dash-shawish Mohammed Ahmed himself addressed them at first light.

'You will load up your lorries with petrol. It is a special petrol, for the great aeroplanes which carry bombs. Until they have it, they cannot fly. You have been chosen to

take it to them because you will drive carefully and fast. This is a great honour. But this petrol,' he added pointedly, 'is not of a kind used by Libyans. And I am coming with you.'

Bimbashi Oakes led the convoy. He had been asked to reach Marble Arch, four hundred miles away, in five days, and he had said rashly, being spiritually of the Eighth Army, that he could do it in four. He drove his own truck, cap squashed flat, bush-jacket sleeves rolled up to reveal thin, sunburnt arms, and as he drove he crooned in a cracked voice:

*My lily of the lamplight,
My own Lili Marlene.*

Up the familiar narrow road he drove, along which he had been chased fewer times than he cared to remember. At the stained columns of Acroma, where tattered Libyans sold eggs and bread beside the unmarked graves, tears came to his eyes. At Gazala, splendid with the memory of South Africa, he tilted his nose imperially, and ditched Lili Marlene for Sari Marais. The flat, dull desert stretched on either side to the blue hills and the blue sea. Wrapped in memories, he drove very fast.

Sergeant Mann and his English mechanics, at the rear of the convoy, phlegmatically picked up the pieces. Petrol failed. Clutch springs went. From the bellies of ancient engines, sorely tried, came the death knocks of big-end bearings. With pieces of string, with chewing-gum, with secret, strange devices learnt in back-yard garages of the English Midlands, among the pigeon lofts and the prize sweet peas, Sergeant Mann and his mechanics kept the convoy moving.

Down, down drove Bimbashi Oakes into Derna of the cool white houses and the scarlet bougainvillea, switch-

backing down the zigzag sweeps of the escarpment where the road curved between scrub-covered gulleys like axeclefts in the hillside. Derna was indefensible; and, almost alone in Cyrenaica, survived. No skeletons of steel and shattered concrete haunted its shady roads. Australians, happy with Carmel wine, might pock the white walls with exuberant rifle shots; silently, in a cellar, a man might die who had lived dangerously behind the enemy's lines, hiding in caves among the enfolding hills. But Derna dreamed on, quite indefensible.

'By God!' said Gadein when he came to the hilltop overlooking this green place, outpost of the fertile lands beyond. He gazed apprehensively over the clean drop at the road's edge. A hundred feet below, emmet-like lorries were nosing cautiously up the hairpin bends.

Gadein had just had an unfortunate experience with a column of tank transporters, eight-wheeled monsters drawing trailers. The road was a narrow ribbon of tarmac with a foot drop on either side to the soft dust of the desert. The tank transporters had no intention of becoming stuck in the dust. They held the crown of the road, imperturbably, conscious that the vehicle which could knock them off it had yet to reach the assembly lines.

Gadein knew from experience that English drivers always gave way at the last moment, yelling 'Flicking wog,' but diving for the desert none the less.

'It is because they dare not have accidents,' a pious ombashi named Ishag Abdel Rahman had explained. 'When they have accidents, they are always hurt. When we have an accident, we call on God to save us. They only say, "Flicking hell".'

Secure in this protection, Gadein enjoyed holding firmly to the middle of the road, watching the English driver's

face change from determination through apprehension and panic to fury as he swung the wheel hard over. Gadein, however, had never met a tank transporter. Neither, for that matter, had the pious ombashi. Gadein had cannoned lightly off two of them before his brain began to work, and his own face changed through apprehension to panic, though not to fury.

Other drivers, similarly disillusioned, halted behind him on the hilltop, and fearfully watched the crawling lorries below.

'Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!' shouted Shawish Abdullahi, rushing among them. 'Pigs. Dogs. Buffalo. Egyptians. Hurry! Hurry!'

Gadein climbed shakily back into his cab, touching each charm in turn. He pulled the self-starter. Nothing happened. With relief, he climbed down again.

'Shawish Abdullahi, my engine is broken.'

'Fool. Lunatic. Latrine cleaner. How is it broken?'

Shawish Abdullahi knew more about the internal organisation of a camel than of a motor-lorry.

'By God, Shawish Abdullahi, I don't know.'

Shawish Abdullahi looked about him for rocks. There were only great boulders or little stones. He felt helpless.

Shawish Yahia joined the conference. He had risen swiftly in rank because he knew all about lorries, having driven for a trading company whose trucks were often to be seen, awaiting a tow, on the roads between Buna and the larger towns. Shawish Abdullahi resented Shawish Yahia deeply.

'What's the trouble?' asked Shawish Yahia, lounging up in an unsoldierly manner.

'This buffalo's lorry won't start. The lord bimbashi has gone down the hill. No one can follow until this lorry will go.'

Shawish Yahia, with an annoying air of casual competence, climbed into the driving seat and fiddled at the controls. The engine started.

'Too much petrol in the carburettor,' he explained with conscious condescension to Shawish Abdullahi. 'Now we can get on.'

'Shawish Yahia, you do not understand discipline,' Shawish Abdullahi reprimanded him, seeking to recover lost prestige. 'There must be mounted drill.'

He blew a whistle. Those drivers who had not forgotten the regulations laid down for mounted drill, ran smartly and stood at ease beside the outer wings of their lorries. The many who had forgotten were sharply reminded. On the second whistle, the drivers sprang smartly to attention. On the third, they ran smartly round and went through the motions of cranking their lorries. Shawish Abdullahi did not know what this movement meant, but it was in the book. On the fourth whistle they stood beside their wings again. On the fifth whistle, Bimbashi Oakes appeared in a fury, having found that his convoy did not arrive, and, panic-stricken, climbed the hill. Shawish Yahia smirked while Bimbashi Oakes told Shawish Abdullahi what he thought about mounted drill.

The drivers stood watching. They liked Shawish Abdullahi. They did not like Shawish Yahia, who was homosexual and came from a tribe of street-sweepers. They thought what a foolish man was Bimbashi Oakes. Who Moves Like the Wind, to support Shawish Yahia against Shawish Abdullahi.

'Back in lorries,' ordered Bimbashi Oakes, anxious only to get on with the war.

Some of the drivers moved half-heartedly.

'My lord,' said Ombashi Ishag Abdel Rahman, who came of a warrior tribe which had massacred hundreds of

street-sweepers in its time, 'it is dangerous driving down that hill.' Ombashi Ishag wished in this indirect way to show solidarity with Shawish Abdullahi against Shawish Yahia.

'Talk, talk, talk,' said Bimbashi Oakes. 'Make your talk later. Now you must drive.'

He scuffed quickly away.

Ombashi Ishag stood irresolutely, some of the drivers with him. Among his other accomplishments, Shawish Yahia spoke a little English. He and his tribe had good cause to dislike warriors.

'Ombashi Ishag say no drive,' he explained, following Bimbashi Oakes respectfully.

'What?'

'No drive. No like hill.'

'By God, mutiny!' roared Bimbashi Oakes, suddenly exasperated by heat, dust, a week with too little sleep, nervous anxiety, and the saddening realisation that he was no longer leading an Eighth Army convoy. 'Tell that ombashi get back in lorry at once.'

Shawish Yahia gave the order.

'Your mother slept with Christians. You sleep with goats,' said Ishag, eyeballs protruding, trembling with rage.

'He say no,' Shawish Yahia translated to Bimbashi Oakes.

'Take his stripes off. Put him under arrest. Where's the bash-shawish?' Bimbashi Oakes himself was trembling. He had enough imagination to picture a mutiny of these sullen, stupid savages, though not enough to be afraid of it. He feared most of all being made to look ridiculous. British lorries were passing, and he was aware that their drivers often grinned.

Gadein, who wished to stand well with all parties, ran

eagerly to find the bash-shawish. He was shocked by what had occurred. An English officer had lost his temper. A shawish and an ombashi, each with his place in the hierarchy, had quarrelled publicly. The spirits which watch over journeys were in a mood for mischief, and Gadein, too, was trembling.

But when he found the bash-shawish, all was well. Joyfully he returned with his news.

'My lord bimbashi, Bash-shawish Mohammed Ahmed is saying his prayers.'

Bimbashi Oakes flung up his arms in despair, and scuffed, muttering, to his truck. On the sixth whistle, drivers climbed smartly into their cabs and started their engines. Ombashi Ishag, free, striped, but out of Bimbashi Oakes's sight, was with them.

Shawish Yahia jumped on the running board of Gadein's lorry. It was his nature to ingratiate himself with everyone, especially drivers who were good-looking.

'Are you afraid?'

'A little, Shawish Yahia,' said Gadein, touching the tyre pressure gauge in his pocket.

'There's no need to be afraid. When you're going downhill, you can take your foot off the accelerator. Have the door open, and your foot on the running-board. If you feel your lorry going over the edge, you can jump very quickly. I've tried it often.'

'Thank you very, very much, Shawish Yahia.'

'When you're going uphill, you must pull the throttle lever out, and do the same thing.'

'Mine doesn't work,' said Gadein sadly. 'It's an old lorry.'

'Then you must balance a rock on the accelerator pedal. You'll find a rock when we halt again.'

'By God, you know everything, Shawish Yahia.'

Shawish Yahia did not deny it.

The hill, when faced, was not as steep as it looked. Gadein left the door open. He made sure that grasses, bracelet and tyre pressure gauge were in position. He drove at first very slowly, but as the exhilaration of rounding first one hairpin, then another, gained on him, he let the lorry gather speed, and began to sing.

Bimbashi Oakes had halted at the bottom of the hill. The drivers drew up behind him, looking pleased with themselves. Bimbashi Oakes, who felt exhausted, watched incuriously as they scattered beside the convoy, gathering rocks: no doubt for childish and secret purposes connected with their religion, or their cookery, or other mysteries which he found profoundly distasteful.

Then they faced the hill which rises out of Derna to the westward, steeper even than that to the east. When he saw it, Gadein forgot his songs and his triumph, and the lustre faded from his skin. The little hills of Laweyn were friendly, like women's breasts; but this hill swooped fiercely to the sea, a thousand feet. The narrow road wound up and around like monkey tails about a conjuror's wand. It had been blown first by one retreating army, then another, until engineers had despaired of repairing the original surface, and had built detours among the gulleys, raw tracks blasted out of the limestone rock.

Bimbashi-Oakes soared up, no song on his lips. Sergeant Mann stood quietly at the front of the convoy, signalling each lorry on as he judged the road was clear. He saw that they were in bottom gear, and that their handbrakes worked.

'Stay in that gear. Nothing to be frightened of if you take it slowly and keep going. All right?'

'Very, very all right, sergeant,' said Gadein with deep

sincerity, drawing strength from that serene brown figure.

'Good for you, black boy. Off you go.'

The road climbed gently at first, and Sergeant Mann was watching. Gadein sat upright, master of any lorry and any hill.

The road swung round upon itself, and reared in a stiff slope before him. The lorry crawled, heavily laden. The engine missed a beat. Gadein felt its power ebbing with his own. He pushed down hard on the accelerator, and the lorry leapt ahead, jerking him from his seat.

The road curved sharply again. Gadein cut across the inside edge of the curve and saw that, with the steering-wheel right over, the wing of his lorry still overhung by a little the sheer hillside. He looked down momentarily at the tiny figures below, lost his breath, and swung his wheel away from the edge. A mudguard scraped the inside wall; but he felt secure again. With one foot and one hand he began cautiously to manœuvre his rock against the accelerator.

It would not stay in position. He pushed it back again, but it rolled away from the pedal with the slope. He leaned down, absorbed, eyes off the road, forgetting the battle with the mountain in the temporarily more important battle with the rock.

When he looked up again, there was no road in front, only a nothingness of cloud-flecked sky and the shimmering sea below.

'My lord bimbashi!'

He bore all his strength on the steering wheel. The rear tyres held the road surface for a moment, the bonnet began to swing round. Then the tyres crunched sideways, the lorry tilted, poised uncertainly, and slowly began to fall. The open door crashed to, bruising his leg, and with

the pain he remembered what he must do. Levering himself from behind the steering wheel, he dived through the narrow gap of the door, butting it open once more with his head. Something tore at his shoulder. He fell, caught at a bush, fell again, rolling over and over among an avalanche of rock and stone. Somewhere below, the lorry boomed dully as it crashed seaward. With bleeding hands he clutched at the scrub, buffeted, almost unconscious, acting without thought, an animal fighting blindly for its life.

His head crashed against a rock. He lay inert on a little plateau, cushioned on fragrant bushes, shadowed by the spare elegance of a cypress tree.



Bimbashi Oakes was arguing on the hill top with a convoy of bored South Africans, who wished to get down the hill quickly for a shower and several drinks.

'I forbid you to go down the hill while my boys are coming up,' said Bimbashi Oakes. 'It isn't safe.'

The leading South African, tall, so lean and sunburnt that he might have been biltong, looked down on Bimbashi Oakes and drawled, 'If your boys can't drive, why don't you keep 'em in their cages?'

Bimbashi Oakes tried to decide whether the South African was a lieutenant-colonel or only a sergeant. A proper lieutenant-colonel would not have been travelling with such a small convoy. A proper lieutenant-colonel would have talked with a lieutenant-colonel's accent, and worn his shirt. South Africans, however, were an eccentric people, whom one could never take for granted.

'My boys can drive all right,' he said, compromising between respect and reprimand. 'And I may inform you that they're playing their full part in helping to win the war.'

He said this to reassure himself.

At that moment Shawish Yahia alighted from a lorry. His emma was drunkenly askew, and his shirt tails, pregnant with disaster, flapped in the breeze.

'My lord, one truck go to hell off road,' he announced, wallowing in catastrophe.

'They're helping to win the war all right,' said the South African. As Bimbashi Oakes scuffed down the hill, he was conscious of loud and heartless laughter.

He was also conscious that there would be a Court of Inquiry. He ran through in his mind the evidence he would give. ~~Had~~ he gone too fast? Perhaps he had gone too fast. But he had been ordered to reach Marble Arch as quickly as possible, so that was all right. He decided, however, to make it in five days, not four.

Three lorries were parked by a horseshoe bend in the middle of the pass. Bash-shawish Mohammed Ahmed, Sergeant Mann and two or three more peered reverently over the edge.

'She's a write-off,' said Sergeant Mann mournfully. 'We couldn't tow her if we could get her.'

Bimbashi Oakes took a hurried look at the overturned truck far below, and assumed command.

'Get the rest of the convoy up. I'll find somewhere to leaguer near the top. Send the cooks' lorry up first, they can be getting a meal ready. Tell the drivers for God's sake to stay in bottom gear. Send someone back into Derna and get REME to recover that truck.'

'REME?' said Sergeant Mann as if he had never heard of them. 'They couldn't recover an umbrella.'

He whistled *Nellie Dean* off-key through clenched teeth.

Bimbashi Oakes, moving like the wind, was already on his way back uphill.

'My lord,' said Bash-shawish Mohammed Ahmed respectfully, 'what about Gadein?'

'Talk later, bash-shawish,' said Bimbashi Oakes fretfully. 'I'm busy now.' He had not forgiven Mohammed Ahmed his inopportune prayers.

'My lord, Gadein was driving the lorry.'

Bimbashi Oakes turned indignantly.

'Who let him drive the lorry?' he demanded, thinking about the Court of Inquiry. 'I'd given strict orders he mustn't drive any lorry. He's smashed one lorry already.'

He looked over the edge again.

'He won't smash any more,' he said with gloomy satisfaction.

Again he turned up the hill. After ten paces he paused.

'Better send someone to look for the body,' he called.

After twenty paces he paused again, sighed, and pulled his sweat-soaked bush-jacket free of his thin chest.

'All right,' he called. 'I'd better go. I know an old goat track down from the top.'

He took another look over the edge.

'Silly little bastard,' he said with real feeling, and shuddered.

★ ★ ★

The rock of the Green Mountain which rises west of Derna is only limestone. In a few seconds Gadein sat up, the rock shattered beside him. He shook himself and cautiously stretched his limbs. 'Here was a sharp pain in his right thigh. He probed tenderly, his fingers closed at first tentatively, then with flooding relief and gratitude, upon the tyre pressure gauge. Bracket was gone, plaited grasses were gone, but the English spirits had been with him after all. Clasp the shining tube close to his chest, he sank back upon the bushes, and went to sleep.

He slept for only a few minutes, until his body felt a little recovered from the exhaustion of its fight for life. Then he sat up again, and looked about him. The sea was already lapping the sun, and a dark bar of cloud foretold night. It was necessary to reach the road quickly, before the convoy passed, or they would leave him to darkness. But if he went up to the road, they would ask where was his lorry. He would have to pay for the lorry; many goats, an infinity of goats, speckled, ring-straked and black. He would be paying for the lorry long after his friends had gone home, a wanderer in a strange land. But Bimbashi Courage was his father. They had drunk tea together. Bimbashi Courage would understand.

In the darkness of a strange place were spirits one could not propitiate, for their wishes were unknown.

Bimbashi Courage sometimes smiled at his soldiers, and spoke kindly to them.

Clutching the pressure gauge, he began to climb back up the track marked by the passage of his body, by uprooted shrubs and the rawness of torn earth, stained a little with his blood. The spirits were unwilling, and he fell back again, cutting his head.

He paced with growing panic about his plateau cage. The sun sank lower. The breeze of evening whispered in the bushes. The road was hidden from Gadein by an overhang of rock and scrub. Below, the ground dropped away to the sea, broken by a crisscross of gulleys, where cypress and ilex fought for possession of the shallow soil. A man might lie hidden there for days; be lost for ever.

● Towards its eastern end the plateau narrowed almost to a point. The scrub here was trampled, as if by the descent of another body. Leaves, branches, even roots, had been nibbled. Goats. Gadein glanced up and down. Where a goat could climb, he might. The narrow track

was almost hidden by the quickly growing scrub, but once he knew it was there, he could follow it roughly with his eye. It ran slantwise along the slope of the hill, twisting to avoid outcrops of grey rock. It was wide enough only for one foot at a time, the sea beneath.

Gadein took off his sandals so that his toes might have free play, and climbed delicately. Sometimes he slipped and grabbed instinctively at scrub, which came away in his hands. He did not look at the sea. Presently the track opened out between cypress trees, green and welcoming. A rock, shrub-covered, showed in the shade of a tree. Almost exhausted with effort, he pulled the scrub away to make a seat, and found it was no rock, but an old metal ammunition box, such as he had seen the nomad Libyans use for many purposes. Gadein had envied them such boxes, in which starched shirts could be folded flatly, treasures stored more securely than in a kit-bag.

This box was locked with a native padlock, into which rust had eaten. He played with it a little, passing the time while he was resting, seeing if it would open. After a few twists, the metal cracked in his strong hands, and he opened the box.

It contained a pair of shorts and a khaki shirt. He was acquisitive now, all else forgotten. He held up the shirt to judge if it would fit, and bundles of paper fell from it. The shirt did not fit, but it was a good box. Perhaps the shirt would fit Musa. He wrapped it up carefully and put it back in the box. As he bent, the bundles of paper caught his eye. He had seen something like them before, the fifty-piastre bank-notes with which he was paid, and which were exchangeable for hoe blades, or goats. These were darker, however, and there were several bundles. He was about to leave them when he thought that perhaps Bimbashi Courage might forgive him his wrecked

lorry if he brought them back. Hoisting the box on to his shoulder, he continued up the path.

Then he remembered something.

Squatting quickly beside the track, he swept together a little pile of twigs, took from the pocket of his battle-dress a flattened box of matches, and lit the fire. He said the appropriate words, looked about him for some suitable sacrifice to the spirits. He thought carefully. Then he placed on the fire three bank-notes, hoping that the English spirits would accept them in place of goats, a thank-offering for deliverance.

The rite accomplished, he climbed on.

Presently he heard a body crashing through the bushes, and withdrew fearfully behind a tree.

The body was talking to itself, in English. The body was slipping about the path and saying, 'Flicking hell.'

'My lord bimbashi!' cried Gadein joyfully. He seized Bimbashi Oakes's reluctant hand and shook it with the fervour of one who returns home after a long journey. He was unspeakably glad that he had not been forgotten. He was overwhelmed that the searcher was the lord bimbashi himself.

'Well, there you are, said Bimbashi Oakes sulkily in English. When he was agitated, his little Arabic deserted him. He had been known to address his drivers in bad French, in German, even in a mixture of Latin and Italian.

'My lord bimbashi?' Gadein was frisking about his feet, humbly with gratitude.

'Not hurt yourself, I suppose?' said Bimbashi Oakes, wagging his head on its long neck. 'Just wrecked your bloody truck?'

'My lord bimbashi?'

'Oh, shut up, chatterbox.'

Bimbashi Oakes felt that he had had enough. He had

risen before first light, to make personally sure that his convoy started in time. He had himself backed a dozen lorries against the petrol dumps, to ensure that no lunatic set them on fire by charging backwards at full tilt. He had faced a mutiny, South African mockery, and, ultimate shame, a lorry over the cliff. He had skidded down a goat track, weary and sweat-soaked, expecting to bear a mangled body heroically back, and what he had found was a whole, talkative and apparently exuberant black boy. Chatterbox might be a useful rebuke to the compiler of Arabic phrase-books. Bimbashi Oakes thought it inadequate, but he could do no better.

Gadein's elation faded. He remembered that he was in disgrace. His body went limp. His bruises and cuts began to ache. In silence they climbed the hill.

Suddenly Gadein remembered, and sparkled again.

'My lord, bimbashi, I found this box, with some money. It was under a tree by the track.' €

'Shut up, chatterbox,' grunted Bimbashi Oakes, and strode morosely on.

VIII

THE COMPANY'S LIFE SETTLED INTO A FAMILIAR routine. Bimbashi Oakes, starved by the nightmare of the Marble Arch convoy, began to apply for postings to more restful fields, to be parachuted into Yugoslavia, into Greece, Albania, the Dodecanese Islands. The British Other Ranks, finding plenty to grumble about, were happy. The camp-site was transformed. Huts rose, crazy contraptions like the nests of kites, built of petrol tins roughly mortared with dun-coloured mud, roofed with liberated tarpaulins or tattered canvas. They kept out a

little of the ankle-deep dust which was whipped into a fog by the khamsin wind and the moving lorries. They even kept out some of the rain which turned the dust to a cream of red mud, and made the plateau a brief garden of flowers golden as the sun and blue as the sky reflected in its puddles.

The British Other Ranks contrived illicit electric lighting with workshop batteries and inspection lamps. From their hut walls, pin-up girls smiled enticingly. In the Bunawi lines, too, luxuries appeared. Musa drove back from nowhere in particular one day with the iron frame of a bed. Laced with rope, covered with sacking, it afforded more comfortable rest than the trodder-ground in which red-brown fleas, too long deprived of their own luxuries, proliferated merrily.

Other drivers sought to emulate, to surpass, Musa. Tobruk was the end of the railway from Cairo, and the lorries came and went with little supervision, carrying goods from railhead to the supply depots, carrying supplies from the depots to similar camps of West African Pioneers, Palestinian Signals, Sinhalese Ordnance Companies, scattered over the twenty square miles of desert between the poles of Tobruk Area: the encampment of Free (Royalist) Greeks in the west and that of Free (Republican) Yugoslavs in the east. These two camps were of an exceptional, but impartial, aridity.

Each nationality had a different ration scale, and the camps' inhabitants were too busy bewailing their lot in a babel of tongues to notice that their sugar ration was a few pounds short, or that a couple of tins of bully-beef had been extracted from a case. Soon, Musa had established relations with the sheikh of each neighbouring Libyan village, and had satisfactorily agreed terms of trade.

It was Sunday morning. There were three thousand men in Tobruk, of whom not more than a third were nominally Christian; but Sunday was the day of rest.

The officers of Bimbashi Courage's company assembled in their petrol-tin mess, less snug and warm than the Bunawi quarters, less civilised than the architectural fantasies of the British Other Ranks. The officers alone, too busy and too unskilled to build, lodged in discomfort. They made up for it by wearing dusty service dress and Sam Browne belts, since it was winter. To hide the taste of water salt and heavily chlorinated, one gallon a day each man for drinking, washing and cooking, they drank a mixture of lime juice and Cypriot brandy denied to those below the rank of sergeant. A portable gramophone, supplied by Welfare for the entertainment of Other Ranks, completed the party atmosphere.

'The Rhesus factor is also very interesting,' Bimbashi Osman Fadlalla El Nil was saying desperately in his precise, evenly accented English. He had replaced Abdulla Effendi as Native Staff Officer to the company, a kindly, round old man, like a cottage loaf baked of soot. 'It seems there are two blood groups. One is hereto . . . but that is not important. There are these two groups, and if the child is Rhesus negative it will not be damaged in any way by the fact that a parent's blood group is Rhesus positive, but if it is Rhesus positive . . .'

Beads of moisture started between the tufts of Bimbashi Osman's wiry hair, and rolled down his ebony face. His hazel eyes moved anxiously, pleadingly, from one officer to another. No one seemed to be listening.

'I am very interested in modern science,' said Bimbashi Osman. 'I have *Nature* and *British Weekly* sent to me regularly. Perhaps you would like to borrow them some-

times, Bimbashi Courage, or Bimbashi Oakes, or Bimbashi Maule, or Bimbashi Walters?’

He bobbed his round head deferentially as he mentioned each name in order of seniority.

‘Thank you, Bimbashi Osman Effendi.’

‘If you please, Bimbashi Courage,’ said Bimbashi Osman tentatively, ‘there is one very small thing. If you say to me “Bimbashi Osman Effendi”, it is as if I were to say “Major Courage Esquire”. It is correct if I do not use the military title, but it is not correct if I use the civil title. You will please forgive me mentioning it?’

‘But of course, Bimbashi Osman. I’m terribly sorry if we’ve hurt your feelings. I assure you . . .’

‘But you have not hurt my feelings, it is a question . . .’

They stared at each other, Bimbashi Osman miserably, Bimbashi Courage with a certain resentment, which he tried to quell.

‘Here, Bimbashi Osman,’ said Bimbashi Oakes, ‘take a tot more brandy. It’ll cheer you up.’

Bimbashi Osman had a religious objection to brandy.

‘Oh, thank you, Bimbashi Oakes, you are most kind,’ he cried eagerly, but as he drank, he could not prevent his flat nose wrinkling in distaste.

‘Ah!’ he said, draining the glass and smacking his lips in what he understood to be the English way.

‘The old boy likes his wallop,’ whispered Bimbashi Walters, lounging on a sofa made from derelict lorry seats, to Bimbashi Maule. He was unit welfare officer. It was his duty, therefore, to wind up the gramophone, reverse the record, and start it again.

*The other night a but-terfly
Came to my wind-ow seel,*

sang Deanna Durbin coyly. There was only the one record.

It had been Bimbashi Courage's idea to invite Bimbashi Osman to the mess for a formal drink each Sunday morning. Now, though both sides dreaded it, the ritual could not be broken.

Bimbashi Osman's father, a gentleman of the old school, had been killed by the English at the battle of Marauba, charging the Maxim guns with his terrible two-handed sword, Humbler of Princes. Bimbashi Osman, then a boy of ten, had accompanied his father into battle as sword-bearer. When his father fell, he stood weeping, torn between duty, and the desire to run away with his father's levies. He knew that the English mutilated their dead enemies to bar them from paradise, and tortured living prisoners. Nevertheless, he stayed weeping beside his father.

There he was found by a freckled Scots sergeant-major, who lifted him, scratching and kicking, high in his arms, and fed him on jam and hard biscuits. Afterwards he was sent, with the cadets of other noble houses, to a military school run by a retired major of the Coldstream Guards. He had marched in a parade in London, and shaken hands with the King, his Father, whom he served as a soldier. He loved all things English with a love so humble, so devoted, that if any failing showed, it could only be in himself.

Bimbashi Courage had never heard of Marauba and knew nothing of Bimbashi Osman's career. He had been warned not to offend Abdulla Effendi, because he was a politician. Politics was not a subject Bimbashi Courage cared to understand, but if Abdulla Effendi was a politician, all native officers must be politicians, to be handled with care, reticence and suspicion.

Bimbashi Osman struggled to find common ground between himself and these remote young men. He asked their opinions of modern science, the disadvantages of

bicameral legislature in undeveloped native states, the significance of rainmaking ceremonies among, respectively, pastoral and agricultural tribes. They treated his ignorance with a politeness so chilling that they forbore even to comment on it.

'I am a little worried,' said Bimbashi Osman, trying again, 'about the state of affairs in the company. They are good men, these fellows; they will serve you very faithfully, but there is a bad suk element, and you must remember that they have never been so far from home before. Perhaps, when you were first away from home, you did sit things a little, Bimbashi Oakes?'

Bimbashi Osman smiled ingratiatingly. He met only a stony stare. Bimbashi Oakes had, in fact, long since given up listening to what Bimbashi Osman said, and was reckoning in his head that, if the gin ration was one bottle between four officers every two months, and twenty tots made a bottle, Bimbashi Walters was hogging three times his share.

'I was talking the other day to your Shawish Abdullahi,' continued Bimbashi Osman, slightly frozen, but plunging desperately on. 'He is not entirely happy . . .'

The name of Shawish Abdullahi penetrated Bimbashi Oakes's consciousness.

'Oi, Bimb Osman,' he said.

'I beg your pardon, Bimbashi Oakes?'

'No shop in mess, you know.'

'Oh, but of course. I am so very sorry. I do not know what made me . . .'

He curled up into self-reproachful silence. In the mess, he must not talk shop. In orderly room he must not interrupt Bimbashi Courage's work. Well, he would try to remember.

'Coming to the Ensa concert, Bimb Osman?' asked

Bimbashi Oakes consolingly. He had no desire in the world to hurt the old boy's feelings.

Bimbashi Osman responded to the kindness like a fondled spaniel.

'It would be most interesting to come to the Ensa concert. I have seen once at Kitchener College a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare. There is a curious parallel, y^e know, between the contemporary belief in fairies and . . . of our own native . . .'

Bimbashi Oakes was not listening.

'If we got the mess cleaned up, Tommy, we could give a party for Ensa.'

'If,' said Bimbashi Courage, looking round at the trestle table with its film of dust, the rickety sofa, the two hurricane lamps smoke-grimed, the row of sauce bottles which alone made palatable a diet of dehydrated potatoes, meat and vegetable stew, and gritty bread. He went through the routine because he had to, but he had lost all interest in the company, it was gritty and full of weevils like the bread, only to be endured until that happy time, after the war.

'I could do with a bit of crumpet myself,' said Bimbashi Walters, showing at last some interest in the proceedings. He was gross, tubby young man of unabatable natural force, who kept a contraceptive in his pocket-book and in peacetime practised butchery.

The party began to take shape under his vigorous impulse. A truck could fetch fresh water from Derna. They would buy a goat from the Libyans, old Parsons at the P.O.W. cage would lend them an Italian cook. . . . They talked excitedly, and with interest.

Bimbashi Osman stood irresolutely, feeling he should go, not daring to interrupt the conference. Bimbashi Maule appeared suddenly beside him, tall, white-faced

and bespectacled, young enough still to carry the burden of the world on his shoulders. Ensa, therefore, did not interest him. He had never quite convinced himself that every black man was not Paul Robeson, he was indefatigable in well-doing, and his platoon had the highest crime rate in the company.

'Bimbashi Osman, don't you think that now the company has left Buna, the Bunawi shouldn't be known as Native Other Ranks? Shouldn't we be known as Bunawi Other Ranks?' Bimbashi Maule spent much of his life pressing on others, in a spirit of self-sacrifice, that which he desired himself. His gifts were generally unwanted, and sometimes inconvenient, but that did not matter, Bimbashi Maule's guilty conscience was assuaged.

'Why should the Native Other Ranks not be known as Native Other Ranks?' Bimbashi Osman inquired courteously, grateful that Bimbashi Maule, who often seemed to think he did not exist, wished to consult him.

'Well, I would . . .' Bimbashi Maule blushed and stammered. He regarded Bimbashi Osman as a typical reactionary, but surely even Bimbashi Osman understood the implications of that vile word 'native'. 'What I mean is, it's inaccurate to call Native Other Ranks Native Other Ranks when they're not in their native country. In North Africa they should be Bunawi Other Ranks. We should be Native Other Ranks in England, but not in Buna.'

'Oi, pipe down, Robin,' said Bimbashi Oakes. Bimbashi Maule had been riding this hobby-horse rather recently.

'But I do not understand,' said Bimbashi Osman. 'If the Bunawi Other Ranks were called Bunawi Other Ranks, and abbreviated in the returns as BORs, and the British Other Ranks were abbreviated in the returns as

BORs also, I can imagine that there would be considerable confusion among our good friends the clerks at headquarters.

'Indeed,' continued Bimbashi Osman, chuckling warmly, delighted that at last he could enter wholeheartedly into one of these young men's jests. 'Indeed, I can imagine some very unpleasant surprises when the BORs, meaning British Other Ranks, came to draw their pay, and found themselves being paid as BOWs, meaning Bunawi Other Ranks. Oh, yes, I can see some very roll faces on that parade.'

He looked round eagerly for answering laughter. Bimbashi Maule's white face went whiter.

'I'm sorry you think so little of your own people, Bimbashi Osman,' he said stiffly, and stalked back to his corner, where he kept a consoling pile of *New Statesmans*.

'Love at last,' carolled Deanna Durbin ecstatically.

'For God's sake, Maule,' Bimbashi Courage said angrily, knocking the needle off the record so that for ever after Deanna Durbin would sing 'Lo . . . Lo . . . Lo . . . ' until someone wearily moved her past the scratch.

There was a shocked silence, broken only by the sound of Bimbashi Walters drinking gin.

'Have another tot of brandy, Bimb Osman,' roared Bimbashi Oakes gallantly.

'Thank you, no,' Bimbashi Osman had tears in his eyes, but clung to his dignity. 'I think I must be proceeding to my own quarters.'

He bobbed to each officer in order, placed a topee on his head. It was necessary wear in Boma, but, in North Africa, made him look like a bowler-hatted clerk, city-bound, except that the colours of hat and face were reversed.

Bimbashi Courage accompanied him through the tarpaulin sheeting which served as door.

'I'm sorry about that, Bimbashi Osman,' he said awkwardly, torn between duty to an inferior race and loyalty to his own kind.

'It is all right, it is nothing.'

'I shall speak to Bimbashi Maule.'

'No, no, please do not do that. I did not understand. I was very foolish myself. I thought he was jesting.'

'Well . . .' Bimbashi Courage enjoyed excuses for speaking to Bimbashi Maule; but not perhaps on Bimbashi Osman's behalf.

Bimbashi Osman held out his hand. The palm was a dirty pink, which always filled Bimbashi Courage with a shiver of contamination when he touched it.

'Thank you for a most pleasant morning,' said Bimbashi Osman with a formal gratitude into which the tradition of centuries enabled him to infuse real warmth.

Bimbashi Courage watched him uneasily for several seconds as he stumped away, then forgot about him in the arrival of the post orderly.

He lived now for the post orderly. In the drabness of Tobruk, he found his thoughts concentrating more and more upon Katharine Ellis. When he was with her, he was sometimes conscious that her eyelids were red-veined, and that she spoke with a slight Cockney accent. When she was two thousand miles away, she seemed unbelievably desirable, not so much in herself, but because she too stood for after the war. He had never had to work for his living, but after the war he intended to make his father buy him a farm. Before the war, during the war, he had done nothing real. Growing things was real. A farm was green, always green, and the rich, clinging mud was not parched by a cruel sun into sterile dust. Behind

the reality of Tobruk was this oasis of greenness, and Katharine was part of the oasis.

There was a letter from Katharine, and he opened it, handing the official mail to Bimbashi Oakes.

'I say, that's interesting,' said Bimbashi Oakes, as, contrary to army orders governing economy in the use of envelopes, he ripped up package after package. 'Volunteers wanted for parachuting? In Siam.'

Bimbashi Oakes, too, had seen the war. His wife was neurotic, and he would sit for hours more at a mean little desk in a shabby office, despatching clabber to Brighton, Margate and Southend.

'No good, though,' he added sadly. 'The beggars don't talk English.' Then he brightened. 'Still, I could have a bash at Siamese, I suppose.'

Bimbashi Courage, unheeding, looked up from his own letter, eyes glutinous with love.

'Drinks all round, Wally. I'm getting married in two months,' he said in a hushed voice.

They crowded round him with congratulations, and Bimbashi Walters drank the last of the gin.



Each fold of Bash-shawish Mohammed Ahmed's emma was exactly even. His blood-red sandals outshone the blue and gold shimmer of the day. His stick, with ferrule polished, was held under his left arm at right angles to his body. He saluted Bimbashi Osman punctiliously, and they bent together to enter the small tent, with its sloping roof through which rain penetrated in one corner, which served Bimbashi Osman as combined office and living quarters.

'May your day be happy, bash-skawish.'

'Peace be upon you, my lord bimbashi. Here is the parade state.'

'Thank you, bash-shawish.'

'There are also certificates from platoon shawishya that all men have had a bath.'

'Thank you, bash-shawish.'

'I think the returns are false, my lord bimbashi. The men are out driving all day. They have no time for baths.'

'Then you must check the shawishya,' said Bimbashi Osman, wrinkling his forehead. 'They must not put in false returns.'

'I saw Shawish Abdullahi, my lord bimbashi. He said he told Bimbashi Oakes that the men were not having baths, and the lord bimbashi said it couldn't be helped. But when Shawish Abdullahi did not bring a certificate that they were, Bimbashi Oakes said he would be put on a charge.'

Bimbashi Osman sighed perceptibly, then pulled himself together and said briskly, 'Nonsense, bash-shawish. The lord bimbashi was making a jest. Shawish Abdullahi is a foolish fellow to treat a jest seriously.' He thought of another foolish fellow who had treated serious matters as jest, and sighed again.

'Yes, my lord bimbashi,' said Mohammed Ahmed, no trace of expression on his hawk's face.

They stood looking at each other, crouched a little by reason of the low roof.

'I am very discontented with the company, Mohammed Ahmed. You must try to instil a little more discipline.'

'I order parades, my lord bimbashi, but no one attends them, they are out driving.'

'Yes,' said Bimbashi Osman. He had overheard the English officers talking after Bimbashi Oakes's return from Marble Arch. 'Praying! I ask you, praying!' Bimbashi Oakes had said. 'As if there wasn't a war on!' And now the bash-shawish sat forlornly in an annexe to

Bimbashi Osman's tent, filling up returns, his lips moving over columns of figures which behaved so much less precisely than columns of men. The only use found for him was as substitute orderly officer when there was a film show or a guest night at the officers' club.

'Well, you must do what you can,' said Bimbashi Osman, wondering how much Mohammed Ahmed understood.

'Yes, my lord bimbashi,' Mohammed Ahmed stood for a moment as if about to say something, then took one pace to the rear, saluted as smartly as the roof would allow, turned to his right, and dismissed.

Outside, a nafar was passing, slovenly and buttonless. 'You! Where are you going?' thundered Mohammed Ahmed.

'Officers' mess fatigues, sir.'

'Go back to your platoon and get yourself dressed properly.'

The nafar hesitated.

'The lord bimbashi told me to go immediately,' he said with a slight smirk.

'I have given an order,' Mohammed Ahmed answered quietly, clenching his hands tightly to his side, conscious that six months ago the need to say it would have been unthinkable.

★ ★ ★ ★

Sunday morning, also, in A Platoon lines. In the Bunawi cookhouse, ankle-deep with mud after the rains, Gadein sat cleaning stewpots caked with the soot of an open wood fire.

Spare men were always at a premium, and since the wreck of Musa's lorry - which had cost him another month's goats - Gadein had been in succession platoon

runner, officers' mess orderly, sergeants' mess orderly, British Other Ranks' mess orderly, and Bunawi cookhouse fatigue man. He did each of these jobs badly, taking no pride in them, and his face had assumed a sullen, withdrawn look.

'Can I have something to clean the pots with?' he had asked the chief cook, Wakil-ombashi Toti Taha.

'There is nothing to give them with. You must use your overalls.'

Presently Wakil-ombashi Toti had seen Gadein drawing water from the cookhouse watercart.

'You, boy,' he called haughtily, having a stripe on his sleeve, and pleasantly conscious that Gadein had once been the lord bimbashi's own driver. 'Don't you know water's rationed? Don't you know it's forbidden to use cookhouse water?'

'But wakil-ombashi, how can I clean the stewpots?'

'That's your affair,' said Wakil-ombashi Toti unpleasantly. 'If you don't bring them to me clean in an hour's time, you'll be on a charge. And the lord bimbashi doesn't like your face.'

It had long since become apparent to Gadein that the spirits did not regard Egyptian bank-notes as a satisfactory substitute for goats. He did not blame them, for neither did he. Indeed, in the tribulations which had befallen him, he had forgotten the contents of his box.

Rocks crashed against the petrol-tin walls of the cookhouse, sending little puffs of mud mortar flying.

'Nafar Gadein Gaqi! Report outside immediately!'

Gadein left the stewpots with relief, but without hope. His hands were caked with mingled soot and grease. The stewpots were encrusted with the dust in which he had tried to cleanse them. He looked forward to the probable reactions of Wakil-ombashi Toti with apprehension.

'Camel, goat, dog,' said Shawish Abdullahi without ill-will. 'You're a filthy creature, aren't you?'

He surveyed Gadein with genuine distaste, hair matted, overalls and sandals smeared with greasy soot.

'Report to me three times after parade tonight, cleaned up and properly dressed. Meanwhile, you're latrine orderly. Hurry, hurry, hurry!'

Gadein slopped dismally away. He rather liked the latrines, for the desert was without them, and peace was often to be found there. He was, however, abased in spirit. He had never been far from water, even in the dry season in the hills, and its lack distressed him. Bath-parade was held once a week, for those not on duty. Gadein was generally on duty. The English bathed in the sea, but Gadein feared the sea. He accepted the abasement as his lot, because the spirits were angry; but he felt it deeply.

Beside the latrines, since the rains, was a dell of camel scrub and emerald green grass, in which a family of mice lived. Sometimes, if he was quiet, they emerged from their tiny jungle to play. Gadein had spent much time there recently, and knew the mice as individuals. There was one, always in mischief, which reminded him of Tula. Another he thought of as Kama. He did not remember Kama especially, except as an embodiment of goats, but that was how he would have wished her to be.

He tossed a piece of bread towards the dell, and waited, holding his breath. Whiskers and a dark grey nose appeared, sniffing suspiciously. Advance, withdrawal, advance again, unable to resist the delicious scent. Presently the family was nibbling greedily, swift, sleek movement alternating with exquisite stillness. Gadein watched, his smile sweet and unconscious again, thinking of nothing in particular except that the creosoted

wood of the latrine seats was pleasantly warm. When he was unhappy he craved loneliness, but the mice obscurely comforted him. He felt a kinship with all living things smaller than himself, except those which he needed to eat.

'Gadein!'

The smile left his face at the sound of Musa's voice, and the mice, too, vanished.

'Gadein!'

Gadein drew back the hessian curtain of the latrine into position, leaving solitude. Musa was too busy these days to have time for him, except when he wanted a butt.

'Gadein!' The voice was very near now, trembling with excitement.

'What do you want?' Gadein called gruffly, seeing no escape.

Musa burst through the hessian screen as if Shawish Abdullahi were behind him with rocks. Although he rarely ate at the cookhouse, he had grown fat and self-important, assuming in embryo the airs of a self-made man. Words gushed from him.

'Gadein, I left my lorry in workshops and came back to the hut, and I saw your box, and I thought, "I wonder what Gadein keeps in that box so carefully, I've never looked inside," so I looked inside. No one but a fool would keep a box without a padlock like that. And with all that money in it ...'

'Did you touch my box?' Gadein felt a surge of hatred for Musa and his superiority. He stepped forward threateningly, with raised fist.

'Gadein!' said Musa, hurt. 'Aren't we brothers?'

Gadein slumped back into listlessness. Musa assumed a leer both knowing and admiring.

'Gadein, you might have told your brother. I've worked

and worked, and I've got about twenty pounds, and you say nothing to anyone and you've got piles of money.' Musa was admiring; but he could not prevent a mean little edge of envy entering his voice. 'Tell me how you did it?' he wheedled.

Gadein's mind always moved slowly. He wished to forget his wrecked lorry. He wished to linger still upon the exquisite agility of mice.

'What do you mean?'

Musa shook Gadein's shoulder in exasperation. 'What do I mean? What do I mean?' he shrieked, unable to keep still. Then he stopped, shocked that he had done this to a man of greater wealth than he had ever met. He lowered his eyes humbly, and smiled.

'I suppose the spirits put that money in your box?'

'The spirits don't want money,' Gadein said, a little sadly. 'Is it the money you're talking about? You can have it if you like.'

'What?' Musa's eyes were quickly hooded with suspicion, though his bland smile remained. 'Where did you get it, then?'

'I found it in the box. When I went over the cliff.' Gadein spoke without hope. The gods had deserted him on that day, his own gods, Musa's gods, the English gods even, which spoke through the tyre pressure gauge. He had sung in triumph, coming down the hill to Derna, and they had heard, and smitten his presumption. There was no hope any more.

'You found it!' said Musa, managing to express both incredulity and admiration. 'And you didn't tell anyone?'

'I told the lord bimbashi. He said "Shut up, chatter-box".'

Musa's eyes narrowed.

'Didn't he ask you for any of it?' He reflected upon all

that he knew of Bimbashi Oakes. 'Windy's cunning,' he said at last. 'He's probably waiting till he can take it all. You needn't think he'll let you keep it. He's greedy, he'll wait until he can trap you.'

'Well, they can take it. You can take it if you like.'

Musa weighed this cautiously, narrowing his eyes. He had forgotten simplicity, except as a tactic useful on occasions. He was trying to calculate what lay behind Gadein's offer.

The mice were out again during his silence. Gadein watched them, hoping Musa would not notice.

'No,' said Musa suddenly, cunningly.

'All right, just as you like.' One of the mice, the mischievous one, had advanced as far as the bread, and was reaping the reward of daring.

'You can give me half the money,' Musa said quickly. 'I think it would be best if you kept half, in case they ask questions where it comes from. Then I could say I got it from you, and you could tell your story. It's not a very good story. I'll make up a better one.'

Musa watched Gadein narrowly, still trying to judge motives.

'Take whatever you like, Musa.'

Musa regretted that he had refused all, but made the best of it. After all, there would be other opportunities.

'I will take half, my brother,' he said grandly, 'and I will make a fortune. Oh, Gadein, I love you. Listen. You know how much money the Libyans have. In the war the English gave them money, piles of money, but they've nothing to spend it on. I sell them a little petrol from my tank, a few sweepings of sugar and tea. I make four pounds, five pounds.' His face puckered with self-pity at thought of the smallness of his gains. 'But with this money I can pay bribes. I can get gallons of petrol, sacks of tea

and sugar. The men in the depots are all thieves, Hindi, Habashi, fellows like that. In a year I can make so much, I won't have to work. I can buy taxis, two taxis or three, and have men driving them for me.' His voice rang with the exaltation of the visionary. He caught sight of the mice.

'Little bastards,' he said venomously. 'They ate half a loaf I'd been keeping under my pillow.'

He sent a stone ricochetting among the scrub and dust. The mice vanished, except one, which lay motionless. Musa rose, and lazily stamped on it.

'Little bastards,' he said again, with satisfaction. 'I'll teach you to steal.'

There was no more movement in the jungle.

'I must do the latrines now,' Gadein said, with misery, with shame that he had raised no protest.

Musa looked at him with the old contempt, freed of the need to flatter him.

'Have they made you latrine orderly now?'

'Yes. This morning.'

'Gadein, you're a fool. No one's a latrine orderly except the Gondolawi. They were born to be latrine orderlies, like Shawish Yahia. They've always been latrine orderlies. Haven't you protested?'

'No,' said Gadein wearily.

'You'll be unclean. No one'll eat with you,' Musa threatened.

Gadein shrugged helplessly. Musa, with some pity but more self-importance, took command.

'You must go and see Windy tomorrow. I'll tell Shawish Yahia to take you.' Musa's face wrinkled in a wicked smile, conscious of power. 'I can make Shawish Yahia do anything,' he said. 'So could you, if you liked. I suppose you're afraid.' He took pleasure, having got his way, in prodding the helpless body.

'I'm not afraid. I didn't think about it. Shall I be unclean?'

'Of course you'll be unclean. I'll back you up, everyone will.'

'All right. If you like.'

Musa smiled, and patted him on the back.

'That's good,' he said. He acted by instinct, and instinct told him that if Windly's attention was concentrated on one thing, it would be ignored from others.

IX

BIMBASHI OAKES HELD HIS ORDERLY ROOM IN THE evening, when drivers were back from work. Platoon office was a square box of petrol tins with a wooden door which, despite the daily attentions of Sergeant Mann, lurched open every time it was closed. Bimbashi Oakes had a trestle table, and a swing chair salvaged from a wrecked ack-ack truck. On the table was a petrol tin cut in half, one half being painted 'In', and the other 'Out'. The in-tray contained yellowing copies of company orders, a comic picture postcard sent by Bimbashi Walters on leave in Cairo, *The Madonna of the Sleeping Cars* in a paper-backed edition which had lost its covers, and some bent drawing-pins. The out-tray held a set of poker-dice. Nothing needing attention was put in these trays, which were for inspection purposes only.

At right angles to Bimbashi Oakes's table was a door scrounged from Tobruk town, balanced insecurely on petrol tins. Behind this, on a splintery plank supported by more petrol tins, sat Bimbashi Oakes's civilian clerk, Hassan Effendi. Hassan, a pale-skinned youth of considerable beauty, had been known in his own circle as a

dandy. He had volunteered for service in the north because the pay was good and it was convenient for him to be temporarily out of Buna. He had never ceased to regret his decision, nor to voice his regret to Bimbashi Oakes. Unaccustomed to discomfort, he had no will to make the best of things. His sleeping-tent was odorous, his once golden skin was a dirty yellow, and he shaved only under pressure. Bimbashi Oakes, in a spirit of purest good fellowship, called him Hassan Effendi, and took him for long rides along the potholed roads, in the back of a fifteen hundredweight Chevrolet truck. "Did Shrimp Effendi's liver good," said Bimbashi Oakes, "I toughened him up. Hassan Effendi, already an ardent Nationalist, regarded Bimbashi Oakes as the quintessence of brutal Imperialism.

Bimbashi Oakes, having been delegated to secure a goat for the Ensa party, had spent a fatiguing afternoon chasing about Libyan villages. Hassan Effendi had had a far from sedentary time in the back of the Chevrolet. His face was grey with dust. There was dust in his hair, his ears, his nose. His white teeth were discoloured by dust. His bottom was as tender as a pounded steak.

Bimbashi Oakes, however, had got the goat, and was content.

"Round up the mazlooms, Shrimp Effendi!" he roared cheerfully, settling himself at his desk and signing at a great rate those Army Books 406 which certified that he had personally inspected the vehicles to which they referred, and had satisfied himself that the defects enumerated in column one had been rectified.

Bimbashi Oakes's chair had a rubber cushion, secured for him, like the spare battery which lit the office lamp, by Sergeant Mann. Hassan Effendi's plank had no cushion, because he had found it necessary to his own

self-esteem to make clear to Sergeant Mann that English sergeants ranked socially below civilian clerks.

'I am mazloom, Bimbashi Oakes,' said Hassan Effendi pointedly, leaning precariously on the door with his bottom poised an inch above the plank.

'All Bunawi are mazloom,' retorted Bimbashi Oakes, not ceasing to sign. 'It's the only word of Arabic I've ever learnt. Mazloom, mazloom, mazloom.' His voice sank dramatically, however, and trouble-o became more elongated, in parody of his tones. Bimbashi Oakes himself laughed heartily. 'I'm mazloom, too,' he said, looking up, 'but I go on doing my job, Shrimp Effendi. When you've learnt that, you'll be fit for active service. Now don't talk so much, and round up the complaints squad.'

'Son of a bitch,' said Hassan Effendi under his breath and, to make double safe, in Arabic.

He went outside and gossiped to Shawish Yahia, with whom he was on intimate terms, about the hardships of life, until a call from Bimbashi Oakes warned him that patience was becoming exhausted.

'Too many beans make too much wind,' he said, loudly enough for the waiting squad to hear; and then, since their laughter pleased him, walked back into platoon office with Bimbashi Oakes's short, scuffling stride.

Bimbashi Oakes, believing that no active service officer wasted his time in an office, rollicked through his orderly room with an impartial incomprehension.

'My lord, I asked for an allotment of pay to my father three months ago. He has not yet had it.'

'Give your pay-book to Hassan Effendi. He'll see to it.'

'My lord, Hassan Effendi has had my pay-book for three months.'

Hassan Effendi did not choose to translate this, but said warningly in Arabic, 'You shut up.'

'What's he muttering about, Shrimp Effendi?'

'I am telling him it's a long way to his village. Perhaps there's not time for the money to have come through.'

'Good. Understood? All right. Next, Shawish Yahia.'

'My lord, I was ordered by Bash-shawish Mohammed Ahmed to report to you. I was driving along the road above Derna when I saw some cows. One of them began galloping in front of my truck: Suddenly it turned and bit the mudguard. I found it was dead and as to the salvage depot was closed when I got back, I took it to the cookhouse.'

'What's he talking about, Shrimp Effendi?'

'He had an accident with a cow. I will fill up an accident report form.'

'Good. Next, Shawish Yahia. Get through in record time tonight, Shrimp Effendi, if we keep this up.'

Gadein tried to march in, as he had once known how. He had smartened himself up as well as he could, though the canteen had had no shoe polish for several weeks, and there was no table on which to iron his battledress, the legs of which were too long. He forgot to stoop for the low doorway, and it knocked his emma off. Fear that he did not look a soldier showed in his eyes.

There were not many faces in the platoon to which Bimbashi Oakes could infallibly attach a name. With a certain pride, he hailed Gadein as an old friend.

'Well, Gadein Gadi. Wrecked another truck?'

'The lord bimbashi says have you been wrecking another truck?' demanded Hassan Effendi severely.

Gadein was startled into impassioned remonstrance.

'By God, no, Hassan Effendi. I haven't driven a truck since I went over the cliff. It was the lord bimbashi's orders. Shawish Abdullahi will tell you I haven't.'

'He says he hasn't wrecked another truck,' translated Hassan Effendi suspiciously, as if he scarcely believed it.

'I was making a joke, you fool. Don't waste time. Find out what he wants.'

'My lord bimbashi, I'm mazloom,' began Gadein portentously.

'Oh, God,' said Bimbashi Oakes. 'Shrimp Effendi, I think I shall call the Bunawi the Mazloomi. I think I shall call you Mazloom Effendi. Eli?'

'Speak quickly and don't waste time,' said Hassan Effendi angrily to Gadein, trying to shut out Bimbashi Oakes's laughter.

'Hassan Effendi, Shawish Abdullahi put me on latrine orderly. On, the Gondolawi should go on latrine orderly. For others it is unclean. Therefore I'm mazloom.'

'Shawish Yahia is a Gondolawi,' said Hassan Effendi ominously. 'Perhaps you think he should clean latrines?'

Gadein grinned foolishly, and gave no answer. Since Musa had said that only Gondolawi should clean latrines, and Shawish Yahia was a Gondolawi, it seemed clear that Shawish Yahia should clean them. On the other hand, he was a shawish. This was a problem beyond the power of Gadein's mind to resolve.

'Come on, come on, come on,' shouted Bimbashi Oakes, banging on the table. 'What's all this chat about? Don't waste time, Mazloom Effendi.'

'He objects to cleaning latrines,' Hassan Effendi said sulkily. 'He's very insolent.'

'Well, good God, someone has to clean latrines. If he didn't wreck every truck he gets, he wouldn't be on latrines. Tell him that.'

Hassan Effendi told him. It confirmed Gadein's belief that his humiliation was part of the spirits' punishment.

'Understood, Gadein? All right. Next, Shawish Yahia.'

Gadein remained standing. He was rooted by misery, dirtiness, shame. Forces pressed upon him which he

could not control, the forces which barred him from being a good soldier, which degraded him to cleaning stewpots with his bare hands. Almost unused latrines seemed cleaner than that, but if Musa regarded a latrine-cleaner as debased beyond belief, Gadein felt that at last he must stand and fight. He did not know how to fight. He only stood, defying the lightning.

'What's the matter?' asked Bimbashi Oakes impatiently.

'My lord, I'm not going to clean latrines.'

The words Bimbashi Oakes did not understand, but there was an appeal in the voice which moved him.

'Well,' he said, chewing first one side of his moustache, then the other.

'Is it one of their thingummybobs?' he asked Hassan. 'Religion, or something?' He liked, despite his impatience, to humour them when it was one of their thingummybobs.

'Yes, it is that kind of stupidity. But this fellow's insolent.'

'Never mind the insolence. I'll look after the insolence.' Bimbashi Oakes thought for a moment, chewing his moustache. 'Look here, tell him this. Someone's got to clean the latrines. Otherwise we'd all go down with typhoid or something. I'm not too proud to do it. I'll come out with him now and show him.'

Bimbashi Oakes, lank and untidy, a born butt of sergeants, had cleaned latrines often enough before he was commissioned. He took pride in showing democracy in action to these Bunawi. He took pride in himself for having the courage to do it.

It was dark outside now, but Shawish Yahia had a hurricane lamp.

'He's going to clean the latrines,' explained Hassan Effendi, with infinite contempt.

'By God?' answered Shawish Yahia, incredulity tempered by experience of Bimbashi Oakes's eccentricities.

They marched solemnly to the latrines, Bimbashi Oakes scuffling ahead, humming to himself.

'Now look,' he said, all benevolence, with his little party assembled about him. He took the scrubbing brush and the bucket of water which a nafar had been sent to fetch, and scrubbed industriously.

'See?' he said, when he felt he had scrubbed enough. 'English officer, you do. Understood?'

The assembly watched in shocked silence. Gadein lowered his eyes. Once before had Bimbashi Oakes, with this air of benevolent wizardry, dealt his faith a blow from which it had never recovered.

'See!' he had said, pushing Gadein into a lorry, turning the key and pulling the self-starter. And the lorry had bucked forward, possessed by spirits, nearly precipitating Gadein through the insecure door.

The procession turned and marched back. Bimbashi Oakes was still humming; complacently.

'Well, Shrimp Effendi, I think we've settled that little matter very nicely,' he said, settling down once more behind his desk. 'Now, let's get on. Next, Shawish Yahia.'

X

IT WAS BIMBASHI OAKES'S CUSTOM TO BE CALLED with a mug of tea at half-past seven each morning. His servant was a tall, cadaverous Bunawi of funereal dignity, named Yusif Mohammed Nur, who managed to impart a suggestion of black plumes to such a simple act as ironing a pair of pants in his shirt tails.

At five minutes to eight Bimbashi Oakes rose from his camp bed, looked to see if any fleas were visible against the white sheets, and, still in his pyjamas, visited the desert rose a few yards from his door. The British Other Ranks were being marched past to work at this time, and occasionally an irreverent corporal gave a subdued 'Eyes left'. Bimbashi Oakes, however, gazed austerely above their heads, and continued his business. Ten minutes' setting-up exercises, and he was ready for the day.

On the morning following his demonstration of latrine cleaning, the ritual was disturbed.

At half-past five Shawish Abdullahi, his face perturbed, pulled Yusif Mohammed Nur from his bed in the servants' hut behind the officers' cookhouse.

'You must call the lord bimbashi immediately,' he said.

'It is the lord bimbashi's orders that he is to be called at half-past seven,' retorted Yusif Mohammed Nur, who resented having his own rest disturbed by a mere shawish.

Shawish Abdullahi did not care to offend one who had the lord bimbashi's ear. He therefore moderated his tone, and said almost meekly, 'The men won't take their lorgies out. It is important that you should tell the lord bimbashi.'

'The lord bimbashi is very angry if his orders are disobeyed,' said Yusif significantly. 'I will call him at half-past seven.'

'You are a pig, a goat and a camel,' said Shawish Abdullahi, never able to keep his temper for long. 'You are under arrest for refusing to obey an order.'

'The lord bimbashi will hear about it. At half-past seven,' replied Yusif inexorably, and stepping with dignity into bed, pulled the blankets about his ears.

In almost thirty years as a soldier, Shawish Abdullahi had never thought it possible to penetrate an English officer's private quarters. It was as unthinkable as seeing

one without his trousers. Shawish Abdullah scratched his head for several minutes, walking round the officers' mess and absent-mindedly throwing stones, then hurried off to consult the bash-shawish.

In A Platoon lines groups of men talked excitedly beside the cookhouse fires. The cooks also had wished to refuse their work, but had been dissuaded, and everyone had had breakfast. The sky was as yet an indigo bowl, and the flames threw shadows which fed the conspirators' air of self-importance.

Musa Fara trotted from group to group, proffering advice, as, indeed, he had been doing for most of the night.

'But Musa, supposing the lord bimbashi puts us all in the guardroom?'

'How can he put us all in the guardroom, buffalo? There are fifty of us.'

'Well, he could stop our pay.'

'And what do you think that bastard Hassan is doing now? How long has he had your pay-book? Does he let you have all your pay when you ask for it, and what happens to the rest?'

A paternal government had ordered that, while the company was on active service, a proportion of each man's pay should remain undrawn, a nest-egg for returning warriors; but no one had thought it necessary to explain this to the Bunawi. No one had told them how the pay system worked, with its innumerable checks upon the possible dishonesty of Hassan Effendi. Hassan Effendi, in fact, was too lazy to be dishonest; his dilatoriness over pay-books was also in some sort a revenge for being called Shrimp Effendi and bumped about in the back of a truck.

Musa, however, was enjoying for the first time in his

life the intoxication of exercising power. His eyes were bright, his cheeks flushed, his body trembled with an electric energy which discharged itself through his tongue. He had never talked so much, nor so persuasively. His voice sank to velvet depths of cajolery, or became loud and abrasive with scorn for waverers. Every man had some grievance, every man brought his grievance to Musa, and Musa wove them into a golden tapestry of speech which expressed all that they dumbly felt, far from their homes, without letters and without news, shut off by the barrier of language, those to whom they had instinctively looked for guidance and consolation.

'Why was Shawish Yahia promoted above Ombashi Ishag's head? The officers have taken our rations to give a party for their women. There's nothing they won't do. They'll even clean latrines. You saw last night.'

'But Musa, Bimbashi Courage is often very kind.'

'Bimbashi Courage is a whoremonger,' shouted Musa, wrapping his tongue sensuously about the word. 'Go to Bimbashi Courage if you like, he'll only order you a lashing, or stop your pay to give his women, like he did to Gadein.'

'Did he do that to Gadein?'

'Yes, he did, in Buna, when Gadein was his driver.'

'By God?'

'By God.'

A deep-throated murmur came from the crowd.

'Where's Gadein? Tell us, Gadein.'

In the excitement, Gadein had been forgotten. It was in his support they were standing, as a protest against latrine cleaning, but this too had been forgotten. Now they remembered, and shouted for Gadein.

Gadein was in the cookhouse, cleaning the stewpots

which had been used for breakfast. Wakil-ombashi Toti had told him to, and so he did.

Musa kicked him, and dragged him forth. He stood in the firelight, tall and stooping, shifting uneasily from foot to foot, and grinning.

'Gadein, did the lord bimbashi take your money to buy women?'

'No, of course he didn't, he . . .

'I'll tell you what happened,' said Musa, stepping quickly in front of him. 'Gadein is my brother. I know all that is in his heart. When Gadein was Courage's driver . . .

'P'rade! P'rade, tshuan!'

Bash-shawish Mohammed Ahmed had come as quickly as was consistent with having his emma properly folded and his sandals bright. At the sound of his half-forgotten voice, many men jerked automatically to attention and then, seeing that others did not, stood shamefacedly in an attitude of compromise, their feet together but their hands behind their backs.

• Mohammed Ahmed did not argue.

'Now what's all this nonsense?' he asked with an attempt at gentleness. But he could not keep the shame from his voice. Mass disobedience was a thing of which he had little experience.

'Bash-shawish, we have a complaint.' It was Ombashi Ishag who stepped forward, very tall, very straight, eyes alight with fanatical fire. Musa let him speak, edging delicately backwards into the mass.

• 'There are proper ways of making complaints,' said the bash-shawish. His eye fixed unerringly upon Musa. 'What is your complaint, Musa Faragella?'

• 'Gadein was made to clean latrines,' Musa answered sullenly.

'That's Gadein's complaint. I asked what was yours.'

Musa looked at his feet, and said nothing. The mass swayed slightly away from him. Musa sensed the movement. He fought desperately against the lifetime's fear of authority which gripped him. Someone laughed. '

'Shut up, that man,' said Mohammed Ahmed sharply. He felt a surge of the power which had for so long been denied him.

Silence, but for an uneasy shuffling of feet.

'Well, I'm waiting.' He spoke quietly, but there was triumph in his voice.

★ ★ ★

Yusif Mohammed Nur had retired under the blankets only to establish his immunity from the jurisdiction of Shawish Abdullahi. He listened until the shawish was safely out of the way, then rose with such alacrity as his dignity would allow. He slept fully dressed, except for his emma and sandals. These he put on, and moved like a saraband to Bimbashi Oakes's bedside.

'My lord bimbashi!'

Bimbashi Oakes stirred, turned over, groaning scarcely less loudly than the bed.

'My lord bimbashi, much trouble in A Platoon.'

Bimbashi Oakes looked unhappily at his watch.

'Go away, Yusif. Only six o'clock.'

It was not thus that Yusif Mohammed Nur wished his grim tidings to be received. He thought for a moment, standing motionless on one leg. Inspiration came to him.

'My lord bimbashi, they have killed Shawish Abdullahi. Dead. Shawish Abdullahi dead. In A Platoon.'

'Eh? Eh? Eh?'

Bimbashi Oakes had always expected that Shawish Abdullahi's disciplinary methods would bring trouble. He

rose and grabbed his greatcoat in one movement, thrust his feet into slippers, and rushed from the hut. Yusif Mohammed Nur looked after him with melancholy satisfaction. Then he bent before Bimbashi Oakes's shaving mirror and tried various ways of wearing his emma, making faces at himself as he did so.

Bimbashi Oakes burst into Bimbashi Courage's hut.

'I say, Tommy, someone's knifed my shawi h.'

'What? Are you sure?'

'Yusif's just told me. The beggar's had it coming to him.'

'Right. I'll get the guard. Better turn out the guard.'

Bimbashi Oakes thought quickly.

'Not the guard,' he said. 'You can't trust them. I'll get the BORs.'

★ ★ ★

'I'm still waiting,' said the bash-shawish more loudly. There was a wide gap now between Musa and the mass. Only Gadein remained standing beside him, half in friendship, half afraid to move. One or two men had drifted inconspicuously away and were starting their lorries with a great display of zeal.

From the direction of the BORs' lines came the sound of footsteps. Men took their eyes off Mohammed Ahmed to look. English soldiers were running, Bimbashi Oakes at their head. He carried a pistol. The others had rifles to which they fixed bayonets as they ran.

'You see!' yelled Musa triumphantly. 'You make a complaint, and they come running at you with bayonets!' He stooped swiftly and picked up a stone. The mass drew apprehensively together again, and some followed his example.

'Stand still,' roared the bash-shawish, but his spell was broken.

'All right, halt. Cordon them off,' shouted Bimbashi

Oakes, somewhat out of breath. He walked towards the group of Bunawi rather slowly, his pistol, which was not loaded, held defensively in front of him.

The bash-shawish turned about and saluted.

'My lord bimbashi, they were being foolish. I was making a talk to them.'

'I wonder you weren't bloody well praying,' said Bimbashi Oakes contemptuously in English. His face was pasty and strained. 'Where's Abdullahi?'

'I told him to get his breakfast, my lord bimbashi.'

'You what?'

'He go breakfast,' repeated the bash-shawish patiently, as to a child.

At this moment a nafar named John Banjohn, who was a little half-witted, slipped into the breach of his rifle a round he had picked up in the desert, and experimentally pulled the trigger. He had never fired a rifle before, and immediately wished that he had not done so now, for the kick sent him sprawling on his bottom. There was a second's tense silence, then everyone, except Mohammed Ahmed and Bimbashi Oakes, flung themselves to the ground. Bimbashi Oakes, his nerves over-stretched, began to run. Mohammed Ahmed stepped quickly forward and, picking up John Banjohn in one hand and his rifle in the other, roared, 'Back to your huts. Everyone stand by his bed.'

They moved to his command with relief, like men who find the highway again after much wandering by thorny paths.

★ ★ ★

Bimbashi Courage, with his chin stuck out and hands which trembled slightly, was searching kits for ammunition. He felt bitterly ashamed, a little foolish since he was wearing a steel helmet and a loaded pistol in its holster,

and he hated the Bunawi, all the Bunawi, with a passion which caused spasms of physical sickness at the pit of his stomach.

Bimbashi Oakes had been voluble but incoherent. He seemed to say that his platoon had mutinied and tried to shoot him. This had been reported to the orderly officer at Area Headquarters, a naturally apprehensive man who had once encountered General Montgomery in full battle array and had never recovered his nerve. He had insisted on placing a guard of armed West Africans about the mess. They patrolled with an exaggerated smartness, their officer was in the mess, being odiously sympathetic to Bimbashi Oakes.

The exhumed kits of his men fed the fires of Bimbashi Courage's hatred. Like magpies, like children, like the poor to whom any possession is wealth, they had collected little hoards of half-eaten loaves among their unwashed blankets, tins of fruit, malformed splinters of metal from burnt out lorries and tanks. Some had two and a half pairs of sandals, others had concealed shorts or shirts which should have been handed to the quartermaster at the beginning of winter. Scarcely a man was without rounds of ammunition, German, Italian, British. Abandoned dumps of it littered the desert. Rounds and clips were disinterred from the dust by a passing foot. To many of them at home, ammunition was wealth and power, whether it fitted any available rifle or not.

'Good God!' said Bimbashi Courage, who had never had to hunt for his living nor fight for his life. 'The place a bloody arsenal. It's a wonder we weren't all killed.'

The men stood beside their kits with grey, sullen faces. They had no standards by which to judge the enormity of their offence. No doubt they would all be punished, for the mouldy loaves, complaining about their pay-books,

picking up ammunition from the desert. It was all one, it always happened like that, they were 'resigned to it. Bimbashi Courage's contempt hit them, and they did not wince, but returned it sullenly, silently, with an incomprehension the equal of his own.

Gadein had laid out his kit with the rest. He was not at all certain what had happened that morning, except that Musa had assured him he had started it.

'But I was cleaning pots in the cookhouse,' he protested.

'That won't get you anywhere,' said Musa scornfully. 'You made the complaint to Windy ~~last~~ night. We were all trying to stand by you. They didn't ~~make~~ me a latrine cleaner.' Musa was busy, with success in his own estimation at least, laying a smoke screen. He had convinced himself that he had acted from the purest altruism, and since he really had acted from motiveless malevolence, there was not, perhaps, so very much difference.

When Bimbashi Courage approached, Gadein trembled. In his world of too little knowledge, without cause and effect, everything happened capriciously. Whether he believed himself to have done well or ill was not to the point. If he had offended the spirits, he would be punished; and the road to their favour was largely unmapped. He stood at attention, shifting his weight uncertainly from foot to foot, eyes cast down, high, wide cheekbones and narrow, prominent chin reflecting no inner light. He felt Bimbashi Courage scrutinising him, and looked up nervously under long lashes. He caught Bimbashi Courage's stern eye, and smiled self-consciously, very sweetly.

'Hallo, Gadein,' said Bimbashi Courage, softened against his wish. He did not remember a lane beside the hospital at Buna, it was an unpleasant thing, and Courage took life too lightly for the unpleasant things to mark

him; but he remembered Gadein's smile, and it occurred to him that they were only children after all, that there were some points in Bimbashi Oakes's story which were, to say the least, involved.

'You haven't any ammunition, have you?' he asked kindly.

'By God, no, my lord bimbashi.'

'I want to see.'

Bimbashi Courage ran his hand over the folded blankets, while Gadein hastened with clumsy fingers to open his box. Good by it, smiling slightly, reassured that the lord bimbashi had spoken kindly and remembered his name.

'What's this?' Bimbashi Courage's voice was no longer friendly.

Gadein looked, still smiling. There was no evil in his box. Bimbashi Courage was holding up the bundle of paper money. He had forgotten the money, and anyway it was not ammunition.

'My lord, I found them with the box when I went over the cliff,' he said confidently.

'Oh, Christ,' said Courage, a wave of sickness almost overwhelming him. 'Put him in the guardroom, Bimbashi Osman. I hope you're proud of your company. I am.'

XI

'I SHOT AT THE LORD BIMBASHI,' SAID JOHN BANJOHN with cunning pride. 'What have you done?'

He was an elemental creature from the south, beside the great river. All day he stood on one leg in the shallows,

naked, wooden spear poised. Sometimes he awoke from meditation and speared a fish, sometimes not. The mission, salvaging him as a baby from the crocodiles to which his mother had exposed him, had given him his pride. 'Me good Christian boy,' he liked to boast, in English. 'Matthew, Markey, Lukey, Johnny. Me Johnny. Know it all.' The other Bunawi would have ignored him; but for the streak of cunning in his nature. Unless stopped, he was always eating. The cooks tried many devices to keep him from the rations, but he circumvented them with Old Testament skill. This, too, he had learnt at the mission.

'I haven't done anything,' said Gadein, moving away. John shambled after.

'I shall be hanged,' he whispered, looking about him with secret, narrowed eyes. 'Ombashi Mohammed says so.'

'You didn't shoot at the lord Ombashi. You were a bit mad.'

'Perhaps I didn't,' said John Banjohn philosophically. It was all one to him. 'What's that?'

'It's a tyre pressure gauge. Now get away.'

John Banjohn put out blunt, scaly fingers to touch. Gadein snatched the sacred thing away, and went through the gap in the petrol-tin wall of the guardroom, into the compound. It was about ten yards square, fenced with rusting wire. In one corner was a puddle, reflecting the intense blue sky. The rest was dun-coloured like the plain stretching away beyond it, for the green growth of spring died quickly under the sun.

Gadein walked about. In his mind a barrier was built, shutting off the future, shutting off the past, so that there was only the present. If he stopped walking, the barrier collapsed.

Presently there was a commotion in the guardroom, and the voice of Musa, dripping tears and anger. 'Yah, flicking bastards. I'll complain to the lord bimbashi. Leave me alone. Don't. I'll . . .' Then the sound of a blow, and sobs. Gadein did not wish to see.

Musa came out into the compound. His cheeks were swollen and his mouth cut. He looked as if he had been drunk for a week. He flew at Gadein, biting, kicking and scratching. Gadein held him off easily, then, tiring, threw him into the puddle.

'Flicking wretches, foremonger, son of a bitch.' Musa sat sobbing in the puddle until he had exhausted his vocabulary.

'What's the matter?' Gadein asked incuriously when he had done.

'You let them find the money. You flicking lunatic.'

'I told the lord bimbashi where I got it.' Gadein understood nothing, not even the lord bimbashi's anger. He accepted it, because there was nothing else to be done.

'And he believed you, didn't he? I told you to make up a better story. They searched the hut, and found mine buried under the bed. I told them I got it from you, but they didn't believe me either. Then that bastard Mohammed Ahmed said I caused the trouble this morning. I told them it was you, but they took me to the guardroom. I kicked Ombashi Ishag's privates on the way, though.'

'I'm sorry, Musa.'

'You'll be sorrier before you're finished,' said Musa bitterly, and slouched back into the guardroom to complain of his wet trousers.

★ ★ ★

The engine of British justice backfired majestically once or twice, and began to creep forward in bottom gear. A

Court of Inquiry was held. Bimbashi Oakes, after an unpleasant interview with the Area Commander, received a fortnight's leave pending posting; not to Siam or Yugoslavia or the Dodecanese, not even to the Eighth Army in Italy, but to the last humiliation of a P.O.W. cage. John Banjohn was examined by three psychiatrists in Cairo who spoke no Arabic, was certified as of below average intelligence, and transported back to Buna for ignominious discharge. Musa and Gadem remained in the guardroom. For two days Musa sought to behave in the manner of John Banjohn, but lacking concentration.

Following the Court of Inquiry, a Summary of Evidence was taken by Bimbashi Maule. The wind blew, and coated his platoon office with grit. Grit was on the papers, between his teeth, in his nose. Grit pattered against the petrol-tin walls. Everyone else sensibly went to bed and covered their heads with blankets, but Bimbashi Maule continued indefatigably taking his Summary of Evidence. It was the first he had done, and he felt the weight of it deeply.

'Just a moment, Hassan Effendi. Tell the bash-shawish I have to write all this down in long-hand, you know, and my pen's dusty. He saw the accused's box opened, and a packet taken from it which subsequently transpired to be five hundred Egyptian one-pound bank-notes. That's more or less what he said, isn't it?'

'It is, more or less,' said Hassan Effendi, who disapproved of the proceedings.

'Did he find anything else?'

'A British-type pair of khaki shorts and shirt.'

'Oh, yes, I remember. I wonder if we ought to have the shorts and shirt in? The Manual says everything relevant must be taken down. I suppose the shorts and shirt might be relevant. What do you think?'

'I think it is very relevant,' said Hassan Effendi, bored. 'Yes. Well, I'm not sure if you're right, but we'll put it in for the moment. Now read the statement back, and the accused can question him on it.'

'Any questions, Musa Faragella?'

'Yes. The bash-shawish struck me once with his cane when we were in barracks at Buna.' Musa, still puffed and bloated, believed in the spirit of attack.

Bimbashi Maule put down his pen and looked judicial.

'Well, I don't know if that's relevant, and it isn't a question,' he said doubtfully. 'But did the bash-shawish strike him?'

'The bash-shawish says he may have given him a little tap.'

'I say, that's bad,' said Bimbashi Maule, writing feverishly. 'Any questions from Gadein?'

Gadein sat in the dust by Musa's side, half in and half out of the door. Grit stung his cheeks and whitened his hair, but he was beyond caring. Every week he was marched before Bimbashi Courage, expecting sentence. Every week words were said, and he was marched back to the guardroom. Filled with a sense of degradation, he spoke to no one unless he had to. Sometimes he was marched out under escort to do fatigues. He did not mind this, it was part of the punishment. But they would not leave him alone, they marched him before Bimbashi Courage again, or Bimbashi Maule, and he had to hear once more what had been found in his box.

Sometimes he just walked about the compound, trying to keep the barriers in place. A few drivers passing in and out of the camp gave him friendly greeting, smiling with self-possessed eyes and raising hands from the steering wheel in negligent salute, symbol of their mastery over themselves and their environment. They

were Musa's friends, who before had tolerated him only as a good-natured if stupid associate of Musa. Now they welcomed him with grudging admiration as one of themselves, for had he not somehow managed to acquire five hundred pounds? Other drivers passed him with averted faces, seeing in him a threat to their own virtue and security. Gadein ignored them all.

'Any questions, Gadein?'

He shook his head sullenly, scarcely sensate. Only in his pocket a lingering hope, where fingers could lightly touch a tyre pressure gauge.

'Is he sure?' said Bimbashi Maule. 'He hasn't asked any questions at all. You've made him understand his right to ask questions?'

'I have explained, but he is a stupid fellow.'

'You mustn't say that, Hassan Effendi. It's our duty to see that the thing's made absolutely clear to him, so that he has every chance to defend himself. Now try again.'

Hassan Effendi tried again. Gadein did not even shake his head, the torture was unbearable.

'Well, I suppose it's all right,' said Bimbashi Maule anxiously, seeking to penetrate by will-power the barriers between himself and this sullen, uncouth figure. 'Tell him to cheer up,' he added with a shy smile, and flushed to hear the tone, as if of a command, in which Hassan Effendi transacted the attempted sympathy. 'Let's have the next witness now,' he said brusquely.

The witnesses from the Special Investigation Branch, Corps of Military Police, were enormous men, Cog and Magog, Corporal Fowle and Corporal Peeding, whose belts, gaiters and pistol holsters, of inhuman whiteness, not even the dust could dim. They hanted together in plain clothes – sports jackets, flannel trousers, thick crepe-

soled golfing shoes – creeping down the suks of Derna and Benghazi, shadows melting before them into hidden doorways; or carried out on Libyan villages raids which would have been secret but for the column of dust from their approaching truck, visible three miles away. They gave their evidence with practised ease, trying not to condescend to Bimbashi Maule as he, poor amateur, referred every few minutes to the Manual of Military Law beside him.

‘T oblique five nine four three two ought Corporal Fowle, J., D for Don Detachment, Special Investigation Branch, Corps of Military Police. On December three, in consequence of information I had been given, I accompanied T oblique five nine four seven eight five Corporal Peeding, T., D for Don Detachment, Special Investigation Branch, to the camp of One Bunawi Transport Company, Tobruk Area. There I was handed two packages of Egyptian one-pound currency notes, nine hundred and ninety-seven in all, alleged to have been found in the possession of the two accused, together with a German Mark Seven ammunition box and contents as follows . . .’

‘Not quite so fast, corporal, please.’ Bimbashi Maule spoke meekly, unable to eradicate from his consciousness a terrible moment on Euston Station before he was commissioned, when two such enormous men had asked him for his leave pass and he could not find it.

‘All right, sir, you take your time,’ said Corporal Fowle paternally, and sat at ease.

‘Now,’ said Bimbashi Maule, when he had covered two sheets of foolscap with these formalities. ‘I’d like to cut it as short as I can, corporal, consistent with fairness to the accused.’

‘That’s right, sir.’ There was in Corporal Fowle’s thoughtful gaze a hint of hidden knowledge, of officers

found in brothel quarters, officers drunk, officers driving W.D. vehicles without work-tickets, officers wearing their sleeves rolled up after sunset in Alexandria. 'You're on that side of the table now,' his gaze seemed to say, 'but you can't kid me. I know all about it.' Bimbashi Maule flushed, and made a blob of ink on his foolscap. The flying grit blotted it for him before he could reach blotting-paper.

'I understand you've carried out a very thorough inquiry into ownership of these notes?'

'That's right, sir. Accompanied by Corporal Peeding, I have paid visits to the Benghazi Bank, the Tripoli Bank, the Derna sub-branch, the Field Cashier Tripoli, the Field Cashier Benghazi, the Field Cashier Murzuk. I have held telephonic conversation with the Army Pay Office, G.H.Q., M.E.F. Acting on certain information, and accompanied by Corporal Peeding, I paid visits on various dates to the Libyan villages of Sidi Idris, Sofara and El Kosh.'

'Yes. Just a moment. And what's the result of your investigations?'

'Nil, sir.'

'That's very odd, isn't it? Nothing at all?'

'Not a sausage,' said Corporal Fowle, feeling the question was off the record. 'We thought at one time, Peeding and me, that they was Jerry notes, forgeries, like they made when they thought they was going into Alex. But the Bank of Egypt says they're okay. Can't tell us where they come from, though.'

'And you don't think there's any hope of tracing them?'

'We'll continue our investigations, sir, naturally.' Corporal Fowle returned to his professional manner, looking hurt.

'Of course I don't mean you haven't done everything that could be done,' Bimbashi Maule said hastily. 'I think you've done splendidly, splendidly. Any questions from the accused, Hassan Effendi?'

Words, words, words. . .

'Now the accused can give evidence if they wish, Hassan Effendi,' Bimbashi Maule explained carefully on the third day. 'There's no compulsion on them to give evidence, and you must tell them that it won't go against them at the court martial – if there is a court martial, of course – if they don't say anything. If they wish to speak, they can make a statement or they can give evidence if they like. Whichever they like, but of course evidence carries greater weight. Can you explain that to them, do you think?'

'Of course,' said Hassan Effendi. 'Now listen, you two. You can make a talk, or you needn't make a talk. If you make a talk you can swear it on the Koran and tell the truth, or you can just make a talk. Understood? Do you want to make a talk, Gadein?'

'I found it when my lorry went over the cliff.'

'Shut up. First of all do you want to make a talk?'

'I found it when . . .

'Shut up. Do you wish to swear on the Koran?'

Gadein sat dumb, staring in front of him at a patch on the petrol tins which looked like a lizard. There were lizards among the rocks at Laweyn, and they chased them on summer evenings, after the weeding, with much laughter. They were good to eat.

'Do you wish to swear on the Koran?'

Gadein sat remembering lizards.

'He's insolent,' said Hassan Effendi to Bimbashi Maule. 'He doesn't want to make a talk.'

The Summary of Evidence passed from Area to G.H.Q., and from department to department, and to Masterson Bey in Buna, and to the old, crazy general his commander. There were two files about it in Bimbashi Courage's office, and another file in Buna, and two more files at G.H.Q., and a file at Area. All were informed, at every stage.

Gadein stayed in the guardroom.

'I say, sir,' Bimbashi Maule said one day at lunch. He had been orderly officer, and had visited the guardroom, and this had caused him to remember Gadein and Musa. 'Those two chaps have been in nearly two months. Can't we let them out under open arrest?'

'No. Why should we?' Bimbashi Walters, too, had thought of them; but hardened his heart.

'They're pretty browned off, sir.'

'They should have thought of that before. I'll try to look in at G.H.Q. next month when I'm down there, and stir things up.'

'You'll be stirring something else up,' said Bimbashi Walters. 'On your honeymoon, and worrying about a couple of nafs. I can see you.' He poured sauce liberally over his stew and mashed it in, splashing the table-cloth.

'Walters, you've a mind like a sewer and the manners of a slum lout.'

'But I know what to do on my honeymoon,' said Bimbashi Walters, unabashed. 'Jig-a-jig. Yum-yum. Get in, there, chaps.'

★ ★ ★

The days passed and the days passed, and the baby mice of springtime were gravid with their own young. In Laweyn there would be new beans cooking, the women complaining shrilly as they shelled sesame beside the household doors, girls returning with bundles of firewood

for their dowries. How long must it be endured? Only the spirits knew.

★ ★ ★

'Good for Shephard's Light Horse,' said Bimbashi Courage, who felt himself entitled, if anyone was, to speak lightly of G.H.Q. 'They've made up their minds at last.'

'No case?' asked Maule with a certain hopefulness. The thought of two men in the guardroom tried his conscience sorely, when he remembered them. It worried him a great deal that he did not seem to remember them.

'Oh, bags, etc. They can't discover where the money came from, but it's conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline in that at Tobruk on or about December three they were in possession, and so on and so forth. There is nothing,' said Courage grandiloquently, 'which cannot be construed as conduct prejudicial to good order and military discipline. If you snore, Maule, and disturb the slumber of your superior officer, that's prejudicial conduct. Or you may breathe defiance. You're prosecuting officer. You should have fun.'

'I don't think it's very funny,' said Maule; and added thoughtfully, 'I've never prosecuted before.'

He had taken part in only one court martial, as a member under instruction, and on that occasion had been terrified by the president, a regular officer, who lost no opportunity of putting him in his place. Maule was conscientious, hideously aware of his own incompetence, and since he shrank from doing anything less than well, preferred to make no attempt rather than a poor one. The fear of making an ass of himself as prosecuting officer superseded for a while his discomfort at others' suffering.

'Wally's on the court, with Wilson and his N.S.O.,' said Courage. 'That leaves old Osman to defend. I'd better have the nafs up here now, and tell them.'



'Prisoners and escort, tshuan; By the frao Qui! Mar!'

There was a hummock in the trodden earth floor of the company office tent, by which Mohammed Ahmed always judged his order to halt. Gadein no longer bothered to listen for the order, but halted automatically. Bimbashi Courage usually sat with his elbows on the table, hands under chin, looking sternly up. Gadein would not meet those eyes. He did not believe he had stolen the money – if he had he would have been punished with leprosy – but no man could say in what manner he had offended the spirits. There was once a man in Laweyn, a stranger, who had held back the rain. He swore, shrieking, as they tore him to pieces, that he had done no wrong; but the spirits smelt his guilty blood, and the rain fell. Gadein looked away from Bimbashi Courage, mouthpiece of the spirits, and awaited his fate.

'Will you explain the charges to them, Bimbashi Osman?' Courage said. He compressed his face into hard lines unnatural to it, because he still felt uneasy in the administration of justice, and sometimes wanted to giggle.

Bimbashi Osman explained, groping for words which would convey a concrete image to simple minds. He spoke slowly, emphasising his points by nodding his head drolly and beating the index finger of his right hand on the palm of his left. Courage watched him with concealed impatience. Gadein stared at the stained canvas wall of the tent, scarcely hearing. Musa interrupted frequently and volubly.

'But my lord bimbashi, I didn't steal the money. I was

given it by Gadein.' To authority, despite his yellow eyes and bloated cheeks, Musa was still sleekly polite. Hope, for Musa, never died, until he did.

'You will say that to the majlis, Musa. For the moment I am explaining to you what is being brought against you, so that you can answer it at the proper time.'

'And there's another thing. We only get food in the guardroom after the guard have finished with it. It's always cold.'

'That has nothing to do with the matter against you. You should tell the orderly officer.'

'I did tell the word bimbashi Walters, but he told me to shut up.'

'Very well, we will make a talk about that presently, but now do you understand about the majlis?'

For simple men in distress, Bimbashi Osman's heart overflowed. He knew their bewilderment, the dismay induced in them by forms of law. Left to himself, he would have flogged them quickly, in the old way, the way of his father, and memory of the offence would have faded with the healing weals. But he also had a reverence for the English law. So fair, so evenly balanced. Head was divided from heart. His round face glistened with sweat as he laboured patiently to make Gadein and Musa understand.

'Is that clear, Musa? Is that clear, Gadein?' He spoke very gently, with love. Bimbashi Courage saw a frightened man who argued, a stupid man who was cullen; at the best he could feel for them only the condescension of pity. But Bimbashi Osman entered the battle with them, the spear of their anguish deep in his own heart, for he, too, had known bewilderment and fear.

'Bimbashi Maulé will be the prosecuting officer. He is a good friend of the Bunawi, he will not say anything

which is unfair. Now you may choose any officer you like to defend you, but Bimbashi Courage thinks it will be best if I make the talk for you, because I can understand the Arabic and the English, and explain to you what is happening. Is there anything else you want to know?

'I don't want you to talk for me,' said Musa, panic surging to the surface. He had not Bimbashi Osman's faith in the law, English or otherwise. In Musa's world there was the law on one side and himself eternally on the other. Bimbashi Osman belonged to the law. 'I want my cousin to talk for me. You must see for my cousin Abdulla Effendi.'

Bimbashi Osman gave a little shrug, as if he had been lightly struck.

'My lord bimbashi, Musa Faragella wishes to be defended by his cousin Abdulla Effendi.'

'But Abdulla's in Buna. Why doesn't he want you?'

'Perhaps he doesn't trust me, my lord bimbashi,' said Bimbashi Osman humbly.

'Well, it's all damned nonsense. Tell him I say you're going to defend him. Tell him he's lucky to have you.'

'He has the right to choose,' said Bimbashi Osman, with reverence for the law.

'Yes, but damn it, not to the extent of bringing a man two thousand miles . . . ' Courage caught Bimbashi Osman's reproachful brown eyes. 'Oh, all right,' he said ungraciously. 'I suppose I'll have to put it up to headquarters. It means more delay, that's all. Perhaps Gadein'll condescend to have you.'

'Gadein, do you wish me to make your talk for you to the majlis?'

Gadein closed his eyes. His clenched right hand moved slightly towards his trouser pocket.

'I would like the lord bimbashi,' he said, so low that it was scarcely a breath.

'Which lord bimbashi? Speak louder, Gadein, don't be afraid.'

'The lord bimbashi Courage.'

Bimbashi Osman shrugged again.

'My lord bimbashi, he wants you.'

'Me?' said Courage, taken aback. 'This is getting damned silly. Tell him you're far better than I am. Try to persuade him.'

'Gadein, the lord bimbashi is a busy man, he has many things to do.'

Gadein smiled slightly. This was what he had expected.

'I will speak for you as well as I can, Gadein.'

'I only want the lord bimbashi.'

'He wants you, Bimbashi Courage. It was the tradition in peacetime. The man in trouble is defended by his own officer. But Bimbashi Oake, cannot, so then it is his company commander. You are like a father to him.'

• 'Yes, but . . . It's a pretty messy business, Bimbashi Osman. I don't know that I could speak very wholeheartedly.'

'Very well. I will tell him.'

Bimbashi Osman paused, hoping. Courage looked up at Gadein. A stupid man, insolently sullen? Or a simple boy, frozen by fear? He felt a little pity, a return of chivalry. It is pleasant to be indispensable, even to a black boy.

'All right,' he said, smiling. 'Tell him I'll do it.'

'Ah,' said Bimbashi Osman with relief. 'That will make him very, very happy, my lord bimbashi. Gadein, the lord bimbashi will speak for you.'

Gadein's lips moved, but no word came.

“ ‘No gratitude?’ asked Bimbashi Osman rallying, joy in his voice.

Gadein tried again. But no words can express the relief of one from whom the fear of spirits has been a little lifted.

★ ★ ★

‘Damn and blast and bloody hell,’ said Bimbashi Courage, full-mouthed. He generally swore daintily, with by our ladies, and for crying out louds.

‘Not before the girl, cock,’ said Bimbashi Walters promptly. ‘Our Robin isn’t used to such language, are you, ducky?’

‘What’s the matter, sir?’ asked Bimbashi Maule, trying to ignore Walters, who was amorously tugging his hair.

‘Abdulla can’t get here till the seventeenth. I’m ditched.’

‘Wot, no jig-a-jig? I’ll take Katharine to Luxor for you, if you’re calling for volunteers. Once more into the breach, dear friends, once more. And again . . . And again . . .’ Bimbashi Walters sagged at the knees with impassioned weakness.

‘I don’t want any of your filthy impertinence, Walters,’

‘Sir!’ Walters drew himself to attention and saluted smartly. He ran his platoon with superlative efficiency, and knew it, and knew that Courage knew it.

‘Couldn’t you ask them to put the court martial off again?’ asked Maule.

‘Not after I’ve made a thing with G.H.Q. about the delays. I’ll have to write to Katharine, that’s all.’ Courage stuck out his chin, a soldier-martyr in the cause of duty.

‘You’ll *what*?’ said Walters.

‘One more crack out of you, Walters, and I’ll hit you.’

‘But no kid, Tommy. You’re not serious?’

‘Of course I’m serious,’ Courage said huffily.

‘Well, flick me gently with a feather!’

'And what do you propose I should do?'

'I know what I'd do. I wouldn't have all this damned nonsense in the first place. I'd lash the beggars till they couldn't stand, and then I'd give them glasshouse for six months, Six months at the double, and a beating-up twice a day.'

• 'It's perhaps just as well that you're not in command of this company, Walters.'

'Well, you asked me,' said Bimbashi Walters defiantly, 'and I've told you. What are they going to think of us, if you let them get away with that? If you're going to ditch your wedding, ~~you~~ a couple of wogs, you're a stupider flicker than I ~~thought~~ thought you, and that's saying something.'

'Walters! ~~to~~'

'Well, all right!' said Bimbashi Walters, very red, and stamped out.

Courage laughed nervously.

'It's awkward, all the same,' he said, inviting sympathy.

'Yes, it is, sir.' Until Oakes left, Maule had never been anybody's favourite in the army. He rather enjoyed it, when his conscience would let him.

Courage waited for the lead which did not come. He thought what an intense young ass Maule was.

'I'll just stroll over and see what old Osman thinks,' he said. 'I don't really want to make a thing about it unless he says it's necessary. I mean, it's a bit off asking a girl to postpone her wedding.'

He paused invitingly.

'Yes, sir,' said Maule with great formality.

• 'After all, it's not as if I'm the golden-voiced advocate,' Courage said at the door; and felt Maule's stupid, pale blue eyes on him all the way across to Bimbashi Osman's tent.

★ ★ ★

There was always somebody going in and out of the guardroom. It was a long, low building of petrol tins, dark because in the choice between lightness and shade, which its builders had long been accustomed to make in their own villages, they always chose shade. Gadein was handed over by the outgoing to the incoming guard commander, together with the Bren chests, the rifle rack, the tables trestle two, the board with standing orders in English and Arabic which nobody could read. At first he had not resented this, sitting dumb and fearful on his piled blankets in the darkest corner. But since Bimbashi Courage had stood with him, he noticed, and resented, it. He had also cleaned his sandals and quarrelled with Musa.

When Bimbashi Osman entered the guardroom, Gadein jumped up sharply, with a sweet smile. He did not understand forms of law or of a court martial, but it seemed to him that with Bimbashi Courage on his side, the spirits might be appeased, and that any visitor now could be bringing freedom.

Bimbashi Osman did not look at Gadein.

'Gadein, my lord bimbashi's going to be married,' he said brusquely.

'By God, my lord?' Joy shone in Gadein's eyes, and his feet shuffled in a little dance.

'Yes. He's being married in Cairo, on the day before your milis.'

'Very, very good, my lord.'

Bimbashi Osman fiddled with the row of fountain pens in the breast pocket of his bush-jacket. He sometimes wished the simplicity of these men did not make things quite so difficult.

'If he were a magician, he could be in two places at once. But he isn't. So he'll have to be in Cairo.'

'Very good, my lord bimbashi.'

'So I shall have to speak for you after all.'

Gadein still smiled; but the inner light slowly faded from his face. His body went limp, the shoulders drooping, the chest narrow and weak. His neck scarcely felt able to bear the weight of his emma, which he had quickly put on when he saw the lord bimbashi approaching. There was pain in his temples, and a sound as of flowing water in his ears. Bimbashi Osman's voice came to him through a metallic echo; first the echo, then the words, scarcely discernible.

'Is there anything you want to tell me?'

Gadein said nothing.

Bimbashi Osman turned away, sick with compassion. A flogging three months ago, and all this suffering would have been spared.

The guard stood about uneasily, trying to show that they were aware an officer was present, without actually standing to attention.

'You, Nafar Mohanamed,' Bimbashi Osman said fussily. 'Why aren't you wearing a bandage on that sore leg?'

'It came off, my lord bimbashi.'

'You are a very foolish fellow. Here in the army you have the best, the very best, medical attention. The English doctors spend many, many years learning their science,' said Bimbashi Osman, seeking to reassure himself as much as Gadein. 'They come out here and make themselves available to cure your sickness, doing many wonderful things, and you disobey their orders. Is that not foolish? Would you not think me foolish if I did not take advantage of all that the English have taught me?'

From the corner of his eye he noticed that Gadein had gone out into the compound.

'Shall I place this man on a charge,' my lord bimbashi?' the guard commander asked eagerly.

'No,' said Bimbashi Osman, a little sadly. 'No. He should be charged. He is lucky not to have been charged. But I have made a talk to him. That is 'enough.'

He stood at the guardroom door, looking across to the compound. Gadein slouched towards the wire. For a moment, Bimbashi Osman thought he was about to hurl himself at it, and opened his mouth to warn the guard. But Gadein stopped, took something from his pocket, and flung it with violence into the desert. Then he slouched back towards the guardroom.

Bimbashi Osman walked briskly and began to search. He searched for some twenty minutes, but all he could find was a tyre pressure gauge. This he put in his pocket, to give to the next unfortunate who would otherwise be placed on a charge for having lost one.

XII

'IT'S LAID DOWN IN THE MANUAL, SIR,' SAID MAULE, nervous at the sound of his own voice, 'that the prosecuting officer's duty is not only to present a case *against* the accused, but to present the whole evidence as fairly as possible, both for and against, and leave the court to draw its own conclusions.'

'Ah! Ah!' said Bimbashi Osman softly, and nodded his head a great many times. This was like the English, so fair, so just.

Walters, a member of the court, leaned across and whispered to the president, who glanced quickly at

Maule, half 'grinned, and immediately recomposed his features to a becoming seriousness.

'So I must begin by telling you,' Maule went on, conscious of this by-play and even more uncertain, 'that I can't prove where these men got the money which is the subject of this charge. I can only prove that they had easy access to Libyan villages, that it's known there has been illegal trading going on, and that various depots in Tobruk have suffered deficiencies in tea, sugar, petrol and so on, which they're unable to account for.'

Abdulla Effendi drew a large white handkerchief from his sleeve, trumpeted loudly, polished the lower half of his face as if, there a shoe, shook out the handkerchief, and returned it to his sleeve, looking about him with an air of bland condescension. Maule watched, hypnotised; which was what Abdulla Effendi had intended.

'Go on, please, Maule,' said the president, fiddling with his watch.

'I . . . just a moment . . . oh, yes,' said Maule, dropping his official voice, flushing, and hunting for his place in the speech he had carefully written out. It began to sound less imposing than when spoken, in a whisper, to the small square shaving mirror in his petrol-tin hut.

The president, Wilson, commanded a detachment of Bunawi Engineers. He was a small man with very broad shoulders, and long, dark hair which he constantly tossed from his eyes. Such was his energy that he was never still, fidgeting in his chair, drumming with his fingers, turning the glass inkwell round and round. His Arabic was rough, but fluent. He worked his men hard, working with them, and they loved him. When he was not working, he projected himself, as from a sling, into any available kind of game.

The third member of the court was his Native Staff

Officer, a brisk young Mulazim Tany⁴, Mahmoud Effendi, easily smiling and efficient, whose two pips went with an engineering degree and a future of which he was, with justifiable pride, very conscious. Wilson had had the choice of eating and sleeping in the Town Major's mess, or making his own arrangements. He found Mahmoud Effendi more sympathetic than most English officers, and they therefore messed together, sitting up late at night over a bottle of wine, discussing how to harness the Buna river for hydro-electric power. The Town Major was not sure that he liked this, it caused a lot of gossip; but put it down as another of Wilson's famous eccentricities. Wilson treated Mahmoud as a friend, however, not because he was a Bunawi, but because he was an engineer, a distinction which Mahmoud did not quite understand.

The shawishya's mess tent had been cleared for the court. The three members, in service dress, sat at a table covered with a grey blanket issued, on signature, by a reluctant quartermaster.

Facing them were two smaller tables, one for Bimbashi Maule, the second uneasily shared by Bimbashi Osman and Abulla Effendi. Abdulla had made it known that he objected to Tobruk, his accommodation in Tobruk, and Bimbashi Osman, whom he called, only just behind his back, Lickspittle, English puppy-dog, and similar names. Abdulla sat very upright, thick arms folded across his heavy chest, or rustled the innumerable papers he had spread across his own side of the table and Osman's.

There was a wooden folding chair for witnesses. Corporal Fowle and Corporal Peeding, together with the British N.C.O.s from the supply depots, were taking the weight off their feet in the British Sergeants' Mess until the court was ready for them. The Bunawi witnesses

squatted in the dust outside, under the bash-shawish's eye.

Between prosecution and defence were other chairs, two for the accused and a third for their escort, who wore side arms and carried a rifle. The escort was sunk already in a stupor from which only the bash-shawish's voice could rouse him.

Musa and Gadein sat one on each side of the escort. Musa looked round the court with quick, nervous movements. He missed nothing. He had already sized up the president and Mahmoud Effendi, and was now engaged in helping his defending officer by attempting to stare Bimbashi Maule out of countenance. Though his face was still bloated, he was dressed with care, and trimmed his moustache. To anyone far enough away from his bilious eyes, he looked like a sleek boy who might or might not have slipped from the path of righteousness, but had certainly repented.

Gadein sat slumped in his chair, insensate. In his head was only pain, and words which he did not understand came to him with the dull clang of a smith's hammer on metal. Bimbashi Osman looked at him anxiously from time to time. The president, when he was not writing, studied him carefully, and whispered to Walters, 'He looks guilty, doesn't he?'

'Like hell,' Walters whispered back. 'Can't you persuade Maule there's a war on?'

Wilson smiled, but went on listening patiently.

'Now I shall call my first witness,' said Bimbashi Maule, less nervously. After a time he had fallen easily into an, orotund phrasology which he believed to be legal, and began to wonder whether he might not have done better as a barrister than as sub-editor of a boys' magazine, which he had been before the war.

Bash-shawish Mohammed Ahmēd stepped smartly forward. He gave his evidence in Arabic, which was translated phrase by phrase into English, and written down by the president. When he had finished, it was translated back into Arabic and read over to him. Abdulla Effendi contested any points of translation or retranslation which took his fancy.

'Right. Do you want to cross-examine, Bimbashi Osman?' the president asked when all this had been accomplished.

'Yes, my lord, one question only. Mohammed Ahmed, what is the character of Gadein Gadi?'

'I'm not sure that we should have character evidence at this stage,' said the president doubtfully. 'Wait a minute, let's look at the Manual.'

He looked, fumbling the pages, for to books he was unaccustomed.

'I suppose it's all right,' he said, still doubtfully, having found nothing to the point, but aware of the waiting court. 'We can always scrub it if it isn't. You always get some kind of a rocket for a court martial, anyway. Carry on, bash-shawish.'

'He is a good man,' said Mohammed Ahmed carefully. 'He has sometimes been led astray by others.'

Walters whispered to the president.

'Just a moment,' Wilson said. 'Any more questions, Bimbashi Osman?'

'No, my lord.'

'All right, then, Walters.'

'Does the witness know how many vehicles the accused was wrecked?' Walters asked in a flat, contemptuous voice, feeling the president's 'Just a moment' as a snub.

'I think two, my lord,' Mohammed Ahmed answered cautiously.

'And that he has been charged with striking a British Other Rank?'

'The case was dismissed, my lord.'

'It isn't your business what happened. He was charged, and the offence was proved?'

'I think we'd better get all this later from the conduct sheet,' the president said unhappily.

'All right,' Walters answered in his flat voice. 'But if we find him not guilty, we don't see the conduct sheet. That's all.'

'I think we'll leave it all the same. What do you think, Mahmoud Effendi?'

'Better left, I think,' Mahmoud said decidedly. Walters stared aggressively at him, but said nothing.

Wilson leaned across, meaning to console, and whispered, 'This chap Gadein. He's a shocker, is he?' Walters, friendly again, held his nose and said, 'Phew!'

'All right,' Wilson said aloud. 'Any questions, Abdulla Effendi?' He had been told about Abdulla, and feared there would be.

'Yes, sir,' Abdulla surged upward. 'Where are these other persons who are supposed to have led Gadein Gadi astray?'

The bash-shawish looked hard at Abdulla Effendi and said quietly, 'One of them was Musa Faragella, sir.'

'Ah!' intoned Abdulla with dramatic satisfaction. 'Well, we have heard something about Gadein Gadi's character. Now how did Musa Faragella lead this innocent fellow astray?'

'They were often together. Musa Faragella is a bad man from the suks.'

'They were often together, and Musa Faragella is a bad man from the suks,' repeated Abdulla Effendi, biting each word with serpent's fangs. 'And that is Musa Faragella leading Gadein astray, is it?'

The bash-shawish remained silent.'

'Have you struck Musa Faragella?' Abdulla Effendi asked suddenly, spitting several feet.

'I don't really see the relevance of that, sir,' Maule said, flushing as he rose.

'The relevance of it is this,' Abdulla was working himself up into a froth of indignation. 'This Bash-shawish Mohammed Ahmed has deliberately, from the very first day, made a butt of the accused Musa Faragella. He has struck and abused him, given him unauthorised punishments, and treated him like what he calls a piece of dirt from the suks. Then he comes here and says that Musa Faragella has led this innocent lamb, this Gadein Gadi, astray. On the contrary, it is Gadein who has led Musa astray.'

'You mustn't make speeches, Abdulla Effendi,' the president said cautiously. 'The Manual says we must give you every latitude in cross-examination, but I don't think that includes abusing the bash-shawish.'

'But the bash-shawish may abuse Musa Faragella.'

'You asked him a question, and he answered it. We'll let you continue for the moment, but be a bit more careful.'

'I can see I will have to be very careful,' said Abdulla Effendi ominously. 'I must not offend the bash-shawish, I must not offend Bimbashi Maule, I must not offend the president of the court. Because this accused man is only a native fellow, it doesn't really matter what happens to him. He can be flogged, he can be sent to prison . . .'

'Abdulla Effendi!' Bimbashi Wilson said sharply. 'If you object to any member of the court, you had the chance to say so.'

Abdulla shrugged his broad shoulders, sat down sulkily, and said just above his breath, 'What would be the good?'

'Do you wish to ask any more questions?' said the president, still trying hard to treat Abdulla as a brother-officer, as he treated Mahmoud, but allowing already a hint of condescension, of masterfulness with a wilful child, to creep into his voice.

Abdulla did not trouble to rise.

'It would be no use,' he said, and sat back with folded arms, rewarded by an admiring look from Musa which reflected his own self-esteem.

'Re-examine, Maule? Any questions, gentlemen? All right, we'll take one more witness before lunch.' Wilson looked at his watch, at the bar of sunlight across the tent door, yawned, and whispered to Mahmoud, 'I bet they muck up that culvert.'

'No, no,' whispered Mahmoud consolingly. 'Shawish Hamid's a sensible chap, he'll see they do it right.'

'All the same I'd rather be there.' He trusted his men generally, but now saw them for a little while, as he began to see Gadein and Musa, in terms of Abdulla's noisy inefficiency. Inefficiency, of any kind, he could not abide.

Walters angrily watched the friendly exchange between Mahmoud and the president, himself made to seem an outsider by one of his own kind.

'I'd bash that wog Abdulla, if I were you,' he whispered, but loudly enough for Mahmoud to hear. Mahmoud smiled sympathetically, for he was no longer a wog like Abdulla, but a B. Eng. of Buna University College. Wilson smiled, too, but took no notice. He had abandoned equality, assumed a father's responsibility for Abdulla and all his inefficient race.

Gadein heard, and did not hear. He heard his name, he heard words of which, separately, he knew the meaning; but together they meant nothing, each one was only a

clangour inside his head. And this was a punishment which he must endure, an expiation of unknown crimes. He sat unmoving before the English officers, since movement in these uncharted waters might be itself a crime, stiff in the unaccustomed chair, scarcely daring to watch from the corner of his yellow eye the outer sunlight probing the shadows.

He heard Abdulla Effendi speak strong words for Musa, heard himself, without surprise, abused. He supposed that he must be like that. Bimbashi Osman spoke no strong words on his behalf, and that too was to be expected. Bimbashi Courage had abandoned him. Who else would speak for one so offensive to the spirits?

Presently the bash-shawish shouted, everyone rose, and he rose, too, because the escort poked an elbow in his ribs. Then he was marched out, over the well-known route to the guardroom, and there was food which he did not eat. Then he was marched back again. The clangour continued.

'Right, Abdulla Effendi,' said the president with a briskness he hoped would be contagious, when the last of Maule's witnesses had gone. 'Are you going to call anyone?'

'I am going to call Musa Faragella. I am going to put him on his most solemn oath, on the Koran, to tell only what is true. Now, Musa—make your talk.'

He spoke, not seeing the president's half-smile, with the air of a man playing a queen which, if only he slaps it down emphatically enough, will cause his opponent to play blind, mistaking the king in his own hand for a knave. Trusting no one's word, expecting opponents to shift their ground according to need as he shifted his, he had no difficulty in believing, for the moment, the story he and Musa had carefully rehearsed together; nor in

believing that since he, distrustful, believed it, so perforce must others as simple as the English.

Gadein saw Musa rise and step forward. A little flame of hope flickered momentarily in his heart. They had quarrelled, but they were brothers, and he looked up at Musa with a quick, friendly smile. Musa spoke silkily, in a voice which did not jar inside Gadein's head. Musa would speak for him. The smile still on his lips, he composed himself to listen.

Musa stood demurely, hands linked in front of him, gazing with child-like frankness at the president.

'Gadein is my brother,' he said simply.

'Your brother? Is that correct, Abdulla Effendi?' The morning's labours had conditioned the president to believe no word said by Abdulla, or his client, or indeed by any native. He wished still to be fair, to observe the forms, but could not repress the bubbling facetiousness which came naturally to him when he dealt with children, small animal, or underlings.

'He means that they went together through the sacred ceremony of brotherhood,' Abdulla explained solemnly. 'They must help and love each other like real brothers. It is very sacred, and very binding.'

'I dislike my brother intensely,' the president observed, and immediately felt ashamed of himself. 'All right, carry on.'

'Gadein is my brother,' Musa said again. 'There is nothing I would not do for him. He tells me all that is in his heart. Many, many weeks ago he was driving on the road to Derna when a Libyan stopped him and asked for a lift. Gadein said that giving lifts was against regulations, and he couldn't.'

Musa paused with parted lips for the virtuous point to strike home. Gadein watched him with a puzzled frown,

trying to put the words together, into the meaning he had anticipated.

'The Libyan,' continued Musa, his eyes sparkling as he warmed up, 'told Gadein that he'd heard the company was running a convoy to Kufra. He said his own camels had been blown up on a mine, and there was no way of doing trade unless Gadein would help him.'

'Abdulla Effendi, this is all hearsay, you know,' the president said good-humouredly. 'Are you going to call any supporting evidence?'

'Bimbashi Wilson, you are being very unfair.'

'Now, Abdulla Effendi . . .'

'Yes, you are being very unfair, and I will say so. The Manual lays down that you must give accused men the greatest chance of making their defence, and yet you are constantly interrupting this man when he's trying to tell his story.'

'Once,' said Bimbashi Wilson. *

'Twice,' exclaimed Abdulla triumphantly. 'If you keep making these constant interruptions, I shall have to ask you to record a protest.'

Wilson shrugged, sighed, resumed the burden of duty, and said, 'All right. Carry on.'

'The Libyan,' continued Musa with uninterrupted momentum, 'pulled some money from under his blanket and gave it to Gadein. He asked Gadein, when the convoy went to Kufra, to buy goods for him, which he would sell in the suk at Derna. Gadein took this money, and kept it in his box. Presently he became frightened, and asked me to help him find the Libyan. I could not refuse as he is my brother. I did my best to help him. I took some of the money, and as I was delivering rations near the villages, I searched and searched . . .'

'No, Musa!' Gadein cried thickly. There was a line of

saliva at his lips, and his face was distorted. 'No! No! No!' He beat his hands on his knees, on his aching temples.

'Shut up!' roared the bash-shawish.

The escort awoke at that voice and jabbed Gadein in the kidneys.

'You must keep quiet, Gadein,' said Bimbashi Osman, attempting to soothe, but with panic in his voice at this transgression of the form laid down. 'Presently I will make your talk. Now you must be silent.'

Musa sat, a little smile upon his delicate lips, looking across pityingly. Gadein had sunk back into limpness. He could not understand what magic protected Musa, but for him there was no protection, only betrayal after betrayal. The clangour filled his head, bringing pain. He did not wish to hear, he could not hear. This was the spirits' punishment of him, for whatever he had done.

'And did you find this Libyan?' Bimbashi Wilson asked Musa politely.

'No, my lord.'

'How many villages did you try?'

'All that I could, my lord. Three or four.'

'And no one had heard of him?'

'They knew him, my lord, but he had gone south with the camels for the spring grazing.'

'But you said his camels had been blown up on a mine.'

'No, my lord,' said Musa deferentially, though with a glint in his eye. 'I said that he told Gadein so, and Gadein told me. It may not have been the truth, or he may have been herdsman for other men.'

Walters shifted impatiently and began to whisper, but the president, enjoying himself, silenced him. The president and Musa regarded each other with a certain admiration.

'Very well,' Wilson said. 'Questions, Maule?'

'No, I don't think so, sir.' Maule rose slowly. 'Oh, yes, why didn't the accused tell this extraordinary story when the Summary of Evidence was taken?' He felt personally aggrieved, when he had taken such pains with that document.

'It is not an extraordinary story,' Abdulla protested angrily. 'You must not make accusations of that kind, Bimbashi Maule, when this man is talking on his most solemn oath.'

'Well, why didn't he tell this story?'

Musa dropped his eyes delicately.

'I was frightened,' he said. 'I knew that the bashawish and the English officers hated me. I was afraid, until my cousin Abdulla Effendi told me I must speak the truth.'

Walters snorted. Mahmoud smiled. Maule flung up his hands.

'Nothing more, sir. I think I can leave it to the court.'

'Yes, I think so,' said the president, but could not resist one more jest. 'Are you going to call the Libyan, Abdulla Effendi?'

'I would call the Libyan if the English police were more efficient, and had been able to find him.'

'No doubt. All right. Bimbashi Osman?'

Wilson looked appraisingly at that round, fat man who had been so singularly silent. What tricks, he wondered, was the old fellow going to pull? They might be more amusing than Abdulla's.

Bimbashi Osman pushed his chair back with hands which trembled slightly. He looked at Gadein and at Musa, suffering with them. His eyes were clammy with tears, and his voice shook.

'My lord, I do not want to say anything, except that we

have all been foolish in our time. Be merciful, my lord, to these poor men.'

Wilson looked down at his papers, feeling both embarrassed and cheated. It was as if he had taken guard for a fast bowler, and the fellow had trundled up a lob.

'You mustn't speak for Musa, you know,' he said. 'Only for Gadein.'

'Then, my lord, I speak for Gadein. But you must please remember Musa also.'

'Is that all you want to say?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'You're quite sure? Abdulla Effendi's done a lot more talking. You understand you're changing your plea to guilty?'

'If you like, my lord,' said Bimbashi Osman with bowed head.

'It isn't as I like, it's as you like. The whole thing's highly irregular.' For the first time Wilson felt impatient, wishing to strike, to wound. 'I must say I don't think it's a very good show, Bimbashi Osman.'

'He is in your hands, my lord.'

Wilson felt for his pipe.

'I think we'd better have a natter about this,' he said, looking cheerfully round. 'Court adjourned.'

'I want the lavatory,' Musa said fretfully, when they were outside.

'By God, so do I,' replied the escort. 'Come on, Gadein.'

Gadein took no notice. The escort looked at him uncertainly.

'Come on, you'll have to come. I can't leave either of you.' He was a thick-jointed southerner, so slow-thinking that he could resolve a dilemma only by violence. He began to push Gadein with his rifle-butt.

Mohammed Ahmed saw the problem.

'All right, leave him with me. You take Musa Faragella.'

The escort ruminated, taking this in, then saluted and lurched away with Musa, who marched in a manner exaggeratedly jaunty until he was out of Mohammed Ahmed's sight. Then he turned to the escort, his eyes filling with tears, and said stickily, 'Do you think it'll be all right? Abdulla Effendi makes a good talk, doesn't he?' Musa regarded all men as his enemies, yet sought assurance from them.

'I don't know, I wasn't listening,' said the escort. 'Come on, there'll be a row if I don't have you back in time.'

Mohammed Ahmed marched about stiffly beside the tent. He checked two nafars who loitered past, adjusted his emma, said encouragingly to Gadein, 'It won't be long now.'

Gadein gave no sign that he had heard.

Mohammed Ahmed looked at him sharply, tapped him on the shoulder with his stick.

'Stand up straight, man, and try to look like a soldier, even if you aren't,' he said.

Gadein winced under the stick's touch, moving uncertainly towards the tent.

'Did you hear what I said?' Mohammed Ahmed raised his voice.

No look of comprehension appeared on Gadein's face. Mohammed Ahmed studied him for several seconds, then bellowed, 'Prade, tshuan!' There was no tautening of Gadein's limbs, no stir of expression on that mask of woe. Mohammed Ahmed tried again, exclaiming himself.

'Your bash-shawish seems to like his own voice,' said Wilson in the mess, where the English officers were drinking tea.

'Square-basher,' said Walters. 'Useless for anything else.'

'He certainly doesn't seem to keep much discipline,' Wilson said, then added, lest he seem to criticise another's company. 'Of course it must be difficult for you, with the trucks in and out.'

'God!' Walters threw back his head with disgust. 'They'd rob their grandmothers and lie about it afterwards. I don't know what you're wasting time for. They make me sick.'

'Oh, well, it's quite amusing,' Wilson said reasonably. 'I like to hear what they can do when they try, I must say.' He said this without meaning it, or meaning it only for the moment, falling sociably into the tone of conversation in someone else's mess. In the morning, when he got back to his own company, he would have forgotten it.

The bash-shawish's voice penetrated also to Bimbashi Osman's tent, where Osman was busying himself with the duties of host, showing especial courtesy to Abdulla Effendi to make up for his dislike.

'He is a very good fellow, that bash-shawish,' he said warmly. 'Very conscientious.'

'He is a bully,' retorted Abdulla, who answered Osman's courtesy with greater rudeness.

'All bash-shawishya are in the nature of things bullies,' Mahmoud said. 'But some are greater bullies than others. I remember when I was training for my commission . . .'

He broke off. Mohammed Alymed was standing at the door, erect and expressionless.

'Yes, bash-shawish, what is it?' Bimbashi Osman sought to combine in his tone deference for the opinion of guests and friendliness for the bash-shawish.

'My lord, I have been shooting at Gadcin.'

'We heard you, bash-shawish,' Abdulla said heartily. To him their duel in court had been a mock-battle, not to be taken seriously, immediately forgotten.

Mohammed Ahmed watched him coldly, and when he had finished, turned again to Bimbashi Osman.

'I cannot make him hear, my lord. I think perhaps he is deaf.'

Mahmoud politely hid his smile.

'Deaf?' said Osman anxiously.

'He does not hear me, my lord.'

'It is sometimes convenient not to hear bash-shawishya, Mohammed Ahmed,' said Mahmoud.

'But it is not like that,' Osman said quickly, indignantly, rising in defence of his own. 'It is not like that, is it, Mohammed Ahmed? This man is from the hills, I have been worried about him. They believe in spirits, and many things happen. We must go and see, bash-shawish.'

He bustled out, the others lounging behind.

'There is much superstition, I know,' Mahmoud said carelessly, making conversation. 'Personally I prefer to believe what I can see, and what I can smell, and what I can touch. If these spirits would come and build me a bridge, I would be grateful to them.'

'Oh, these natives believe in the spirits,' Abdulla retorted, pleased to contradict Mahmoud. 'I have seen things like this. But going deaf just now is too much of a good thing. That Osman is a cunning old fox, he pretends he is too honest to tell stories to the court, but he is cunning all the same.' He glanced sharply at Mahmoud, to make sure that this shaft had found its target.

'Well, we shall see what Bimbashi Wilson has to say,' said Mahmoud, still smiling. 'I think he is like me, he prefers his spirits in a glass.'

A little group stood by the tent. Bimbashi Osman bustled about Gadein, his round face wrinkled with compassion.

'Gadein!' he shouted, though not very loudly. 'Gadein,

you poor fellow, it is I, Bimbashi Osman. Can you hear me?

'There are no English officers here to watch you, Osman,' Abdulla said pointedly, then roared suddenly, 'Gadein, you're free.'

The brown eyes, hard with misery, stared past him.

'Well, we shall see what we shall see,' Abdulla said, looking foolish. 'Perhaps I had better make sure Musa hasn't gone blind. Though of course he is only a bad man from the suks, he hasn't learnt these tricks.' He stalked away, envious that Osman, and not he, had thought of this gambit.

'What's the trouble, Bimbashi Osman?' Maule, restless as usual, had raced ahead of his English companions to see what the shouting was.

'Oh, Bimbashi Maule, it is this poor man Gadein. He has gone deaf.'

'Gone deaf?'

'The bash-lawish hal shouted at him, and I have shouted at him, and Abdulla Effendi has shouted at him, but we cannot make him hear.'

Maule looked wonderingly from Osman to Gadein. He knew that others said he believed things too easily, he tried to guard against it, but he too shouted. His voice became shrill in the upper registers. The sound of it made him blush.

'I say,' he called to the others, 'Osman says this chap's gone deaf.'

'Oh, come now,' said Wilson.

'If a black man told Robin I was the Queen of Sheba, he'd believe him,' said Walters; but they, too, quickened their pace.

Each shouted in turn, fascinated, as boys in a tunnel shout to hear the echo. There was no echo. They suddenly

felt foolish, standing in the middle of this desert plain, shouting at a black savage, and looked at each other self-consciously, trying to laugh.

'I'll settle this damned nonsense,' Walters said impatiently. He ran across to the H.Q. car park, tried the klaxons of one or two trucks, and selecting that with the loudest, drove back with a knowing grin. He let the engine race behind Gadein. Then he sounded the klaxon. Gadein did not tense a muscle.

'Well, it's a good act,' he said disappointedly, and shouted brusquely at a passing nafar to take the truck back.

They stood conferring, puzzled, half-believing, yet with an ingrained caution and common sense.

'What do you think we should do, Maule?'

'Well, I . . . ' Maule wondered what he did think. They told so many extraordinary stories, they lived in a world so far outside his comprehension. In his own world, he could judge truth by measuring the teller against a known background, but here there were no landmarks. He felt a crushing weight of responsibility, resentment still at having been deceived by Musa, remorse that this was what civilisation, in which he played a part, could do to a man, to make him deaf from suffering. 'I don't really know, sir,' he said weakly. 'I suppose it would be fairer . . . '

'Oh, for God's sake,' Walters said impatiently. 'Haven't we wasted enough time?'

Bimbashi Osman danced anxiously about them, studying their faces, their words.

'My lord, he is from the hills. It is a kind of auto-hysteria induced by fear of the spirits. I have seen a man die because of it, just wither away and die.' He spoke very quickly, beseeching them to understand, to have

mercy. He saw Walters' smile of disbelief, and began to sweat.

'You cannot continue the court, my lord, if he is deaf. For he cannot hear what is said.'

Wilson had hesitated. Now admiration, understanding, dawned in his eyes.

He still admired Musa for the coherence of his evidence and the gallantry of his telling, while he did not believe a word of it. As John Wilson, civil engineer, he would have laughed understandingly at these men, confiscated the money, told them not to get found out in future. He understood why Musa had had to tell his story. He understood now, admiringly, why Gadein had to seem deaf. But as president of a Summary Court Martial, mouthpiece of the Manual, he must move ponderously along the track laid down.

'Well, it's a good try,' he said kindly to Bimbashi Osman. 'But I didn't adjourn the court to find Abdulla Effendi's story on. I don't think I can, in fairness, adjourn for your chap's deafness. Eh?'

'But my lord . . .'

'I'll put a note in the record, if you like, and the powers that be can chuck the thing back at us if they like. Now, gentlemen, for heaven's sake let's get on.'

Abdulla Effendi then spoke for half an hour and had some enjoyable tussles with the court. Maule mumbled, conscience-stricken. Bimbashi Osman announced tearfully that he had nothing more to say.

'I don't think we can possibly make it less than six months,' Wilson said to his fellow-members when they adjourned for the verdict. 'Six months' detention and dishonourable discharge. Agreed, gentlemen? Quite a good show, I thought. Highly ingenious.'

Gadein did not hear. His suffering was already old.

XIII

THE DETENTION CENTRE WAS A FORMER PRISONER-of-war cage, distinguished from the rest of nothingness by barbed wire, wooden watch towers, and searchlights at each corner.

Its commanding officer was a commissioned regimental sergeant-major with a mournful, leathery face. He was proud of his centre, and would have liked it to compare with the legendary glasshouses of Palestine and Egypt.

'Trouble is,' he would say mournfully, 'they don't give you any facilities. Miles and miles of flick-all. How can a man be expected to make a detention centre out of that?'

However, he did his best. The centre glistened with whitewash. From the guardroom by the wire gate, lines of whitewashed petrol tins marked lanes to the office, to the staff sleeping quarters, to the prisoners' sleeping quarters, or just to another segment of wire. The square was outlined by a triple row of whitewashed tins, ornately staggered. The huts were whitewashed, glittering under the sun with the cruel brilliance of a mirage. Men's eyes were dazzled, and began to ache. There was no relief, except inside, and they were not allowed inside between reveille and sunset.

There was always something to whitewash. Men moved at the double about the centre, carrying buckets of whitewash. Sometimes the supply of whitewash was exhausted, and the commandant complained to authority about lack of facilities. At these times, however, the men were provided with other pursuits. Outside each building was a

fire alarm, a salvaged shell case hung from wooden gallows. All these had to be polished. If that failed, there was a square mile of dust to be raked and swept, or latrines to be dug, sufficient for an army with dysentery. When there was no room to dig more, they could always be filled up again.

'Now I don't want to see you here again,' the commandant would tell his prisoners paternally when they left. 'If you come here again, you're letting me down, see? They'll know I don't treat you firm enough, and I don't want that, see? So don't let me down, will you?' They rarely let him down.

There was a small Bunawi wing at the centre, in charge of Shawish Taha, an old man with no forehead and prognathous jaws, who looked as if he walked upright with difficulty. He was not a cruel man, but all his life had been spent obeying orders. He had no home, no family, no interest in life except obeying orders.

Shawish Taha was waiting for Gadein and Musa when they arrived, as he liked to wait for all newcomers. They were stiff from riding in the back of a truck, and their faces were covered with dust. Shawish Taha knew all about this.

'Hurry!' he shouted as they clambered laboriously out with their kit. 'Everything here at the double! You're lazy! Get that stuff out of the truck quickly! I'll teach you to be idle.'

He beat with his cane at the tender bones behind the ankles, which made them slower, which enabled him to beat them more. Shawish Taha liked to initiate newcomers quickly. They were always dusty, so he made them take a cold shower which caused them to miss their dinners. Shawish Taha's dinner was kept hot for him, until such time as his duties were accomplished.

'He's a good man, a very good man,' said the commandant approvingly. 'Very conscientious! Does his fellows a lot of good. They never come here again.'

Musa, whose intelligence service was excellent, knew all about Shawish Taha. He could not be bribed, but he could be flattered. Musa endured the beating without complaint, and indeed, after a few minutes, moved so fast that Shawish Taha scarcely touched him. Afterwards, while they were having their baths, he said, 'My cousin, Abdulla Effendi, was asking after you.'

Shawish Taha made a Neanderthal noise.

'He told me you were the best shawish he had ever met in the Buna Defence Force. He said if anyone obeyed your orders, you were always fair.'

Shawish Taha grunted again. It took some time for anything to penetrate his brain; but he had been brought up to respect rank and authority.

'Come on, don't talk, hurry,' he said automatically, hitting Musa on the shoulder with his cane, but lightly. After three days he made Musa his batman. This was harder work than Musa was used to, since everything of Shawish Taha's had to be blancoed and polished daily, but it was more restful than being doubled round the camp.

Gadein knew nothing about Shawish Taha, but Shawish Taha knew all about Gadein.

'I'm a witch-doctor,' exclaimed Shawish Taha gleefully. 'I can cure deaf people'; and shook his cane.

Gadein lived in a world without sound and without meaning. After the court martial he had been taken back to the guardroom and, though he knew nothing about this, there had been much correspondence and a great searching of consciences concerning him. First he was put into hospital. He lay motionless, between unaccus-

tomed sheets, and men mouthed at him, or bellowed in his ear when he was asleep. He slept little, for in sleep the spirits haunted him; but he did not hear the men. Then he was taken in a train, and an Englishman poked tubes in his ears and shone lights in his mouth. He suffered it, since there was nothing else to do. Then he was given to Shawish Taha.

He began to be aware of the importance of hands. By watching Shawish Taha's hands, he could sometimes guess when a blow was coming, and dodge to evade it; but often enough it was too much trouble to dodge, so he suffered it. The days were without end, for there was no release in the troubled world of his sleep.



It was the custom of the English officers, when life in Tobruk became too much for them, to enjoy a couple of days off in the green shade of Derna. Taking a fifteen hundredweight truck, they would spend the time bathing in the pleasant bays below Cyrene, poking about the ruins of that once-great city; or idling among the tiny booths of the Derna suk, which were stocked with grapes, leather sandals intricately embroidered with silver wire, packets of Al cigarette papers, derelict German compasses, and decorated camel saddles.

They felt a great hunger to buy, to buy anything which glittered, or had a scent, or was softer to the touch than gritty dust. They crowded into the officers' shop, spending as much as a pound on scented shaving creams, soap hair lotions in pretty bottles. They bought cheap silk scarves from the suk, sandals for their girls, cooling grapes, until their hunger was appeased.

They called their expeditions 'Visiting Detachments', but deceived nobody.

When Plato was invited to draft a code of laws for the city of Cyrene, he refused, saying that no men are so difficult to govern as those to whom wealth and prosperity have brought the illusion that they are happy. The city stands upon a hillside, below it the fertile plain stretching to the sea. Sharp scent of fir and sweetness of honeysuckle mingle with the smell of the rich earth. Lizards sun themselves upon the crumbling walls, and goats drink, bleating and butting, from the spring once sacred to Apollo.

Courage, Maule and Walters sat one morning on the sun-warmed seat of a marble lavatory, gazing across the broken columns of the hillside to a horizon of blue, gold and green, framed between groves of cypress.

'I put some beer to cool in that stream under Balbo's house,' said Walters. 'It's as good as ice.'

They had climbed, sweating, from the stream, which fell from the escarpment into a basin twenty feet below, and meandered between shrub and cypress towards the sea.

'Can't you ever forget beer, Wally?' asked Maule.

'Why should I forget beer?'

'Well, there's this, for instance.' He swept reverent hands at the crumbling columns. 'And you might think sometimes that the man who carried the Cross came from here. Perhaps he sat where we're sitting.'

'*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*,' replied Walters. 'I expect he used sand or stones instead of paper, like all the other wogs.'

'God, what a lout you are, Wally.'

'I like my crumpet, and I like my wallop,' said Bimbashi Walters stoutly. 'And so do you, only you prefer to make yourself miserable by not admitting it. I'm going back to my beer. Coming, Tommy?'

'No, I think I'll sit here a bit.' Courage was languid with sun and exercise. The green land made him think of

after the war, and of a hotel bed in Luxor, decked with mosquito curtains as for a bride.

Walters waddled away down the hill.

'He looks like a barrel of wallop on legs,' Maule said bitterly. But he could not sit peaceful, while somebody, somewhere, was suffering. He stalked across to examine the broken fountain, declaiming in a voice hampered by adenoids and self-consciousness, 'In place of short-finned dolphins, they shall take to themselves swift horses; and instead of oars shall they ply the reins of the wind-swift chariots.' London he deplored; but the thought that the Greeks had running water in a lavatory at Cyrene filled him with spiritual exaltation.

'Oh, come on, if you can't keep still,' Courage said impatiently. 'Let's go and drink some of Wally's wallop.'

They walked up to the road, and under a cliff burrowed with rock-cut tombs.

'Quite a place to hide,' Courage said appraisingly. 'Chap came into G.H.Q. once, one of the S.A.S. boys working behind the Jerry lines. He told me he'd lived in one of those dumps for a week.'

Maule shivered in the sunlight. He would have given much to have his physical courage tested, and yet dreaded the result.

'Not my cup of tea,' he said.

'Oh, I don't know. There was another chap who'd been chased all over Albania. He got away all right, but he had to ditch a bag of gold sovereigns with all his equipment. And now he's proscribed, so he won't be able to go back and find them.'

'Did he . . . I say, sir, what about Gadein?'

'Well, what about Gadein?' asked Courage, who had a tender conscience.

'Didn't they have money to pay the Libyans, the chaps

working behind the lines? And someone may have ditched it? And Gadein may have foud it?' .

'I suppose so,' Courage said grudgingly. 'But old Osman thinks he pinched it, and anyway the thing's all washed up.'

★ ★ ★

The detention camp's day began at five o'clock with reveille played on the bugle. Gadein did not hear, so they pulled the blankets from him, and overturned his bed. Then he was doubled out to P.T., and doubled from P.T. to breakfast, and doubled from breakfast to parade.

'All deaf men, two paces forward,' bellowed Shawish Taha. The parade tittered sycophantically, and Gadein stood still.

'Disobeying an order. Company office for you,' said Shawish Taha with satisfaction. But Gadein did not hear, so it did not much matter. He kept his eyes on Shawish Taha's hands.

★ ★ ★

Bimbashi Maule was a persistent young man when his conscience was roused. He nagged over the beer, and he nagged while they were sunbathing, and he nagged over dinner in the Officers' Club, as the white-clad waiter with his scarlet cummerbund served them turned and tepid soup.

'But sir, Gadein's story could be true.'

'So what?' said Bimbashi Walters. 'Suffrajy, aawiz vino. Muchas vino, vino khebyr. Mafhoom?'

'Don't show off your languages,' Wally. He speaks perfectly good English.'

'I'll bet he knows jig-a-jig, anyway. Eh? Don't you, boy?'

The waiter's face split from ear to ear, and he mumbled happily to himself as he went away. Maule watched with envy. Whenever he tried to be friendly with waiters, he elicited only austere, if silent, rebuke.

'But sir . . .'

'For God's sake, Maule, shut up. No shop in mess.'

'Well, it is a chap's future, you know, sir.'

'All right. I'll do something about it. I'll see the Area Commander. I'll circularise Shepherd's Light Horse. I'll go down in person and confront them with your ingenious theories. But if you say one word more about it before we get back to Tobruk, I'll crown you.'

'Sorry, sir,' said Maule sulkily, and behaved with such grim punctilio that even Bimbashi Walters became depressed.

★ ★ ★

'Well, Gadein,' said Bimbashi Courage, smiling kindly.

Gadein stood once more in the company office tent, he did not know why. He had been pretending to dig a hole at the detention camp when Shawish Taha prodded him towards the commandant's office. The commandant had a trick, when his lips moved, of beating time with his right hand on the desk. Gadein watched the commandant's hand. Presently Shawish Taha prodded him again, and prodded him, but did not beat him, towards the billet, where Musa was packing his kit. They made signs to Gadein, and he did what they seemed to want. Then there was a truck, and he was by the hummock in the office of Bimbashi Courage, who smiled, but kept his hands below the table.

Courage had forgotten the remoter past. He knew that he had fought a hard battle on Gadein's behalf, for nobody likes to interfere with the sentence of a court

martial which has been promulgated. Courage had flown to Cairo, risking a severe rocket, which he had received, and had there seen a friend in Records at G.H.Q. Records had been able to produce the history of a Major Hebbledine, seconded for special duties, who had disappeared in the neighbourhood of Derna in 1942. He had had money to pay the Libyans with whom he was working.

It was Courage's habit to seem to despise work, and, when he did work hard, to give the impression that he did it carelessly, in his spare time, between rounds of golf or hours spent sunbathing. His achievements seemed more brilliant so.

But he could work hard. He could also talk persuasively, and he had many friends. He had risked their friendship, making a nuisance of himself at G.H.Q. with the story of Major Hebbledine and Gadein. He had endured much ragging, but he had done this willingly, not because he thought he owed a debt to Gadein, but because Gadein was one of his dependants, who might have been wronged. He had not got the conviction quashed; but he had got some of the sentence remitted, with a small reward for Gadein.

'And after all, Bimbashi Osman,' he said consolingly, 'he'll go home. I don't really think he's cut out for the army, you know.'

All this Bimbashi Courage remembered, smiling kindly. He was disappointed that Gadein did not smile in return. When Courage raised his hand to adjust his cap, Gadein winced.

'Make it quite clear he's going home,' he told Bimbashi Osman. It was what he most wished for himself.

'He will not understand, my lord. He is deaf.'

Despite all that he had done, Courage still did not believe in Gadein's deafness.

'Nonsense, Bimbashi Osman,' he said bluffly. 'He's put up a good show, but it's over now, he can relax.'

Bimbashi Osman shrugged delicately.

'He will be cured in his own hills, when he gets home. He is deaf because he believes he has offended the spirits. When he has been purified before the spirits, he will hear.'

'Oh, very well,' said Bimbashi Courage huffily, for he resented ingratitude. 'Let him wait in the guardroom with Musa till train time. I don't want them talking to the other men. Oh, and you can give him this.'

He handed an envelope to Bimbashi Osman.

'What is this, my lord?'

'That, Bimbashi Osman, is a reward of twenty pounds for finding W.D. property, which I wrung with blood, sweat, toil and tears from G.H.Q.'

Courage gazed self-consciously at his blanket-covered table.

'I thought it might help him to think more kindly of us when he gets home,' he said.

'He will always thank kindly of you, my lord bimbashi,' cried Bimbashi Osman impetuously, tears flooding his voice.

'Well, I hope so.' Courage rose abruptly and held out his hand to Gadein. Gadein shied away with wary eyes.

They marched back along the familiar path to the guardroom, and Bimbashi Osman leaked good advice.

'Now, Musa, I hope that you will have learnt your lesson, and in future will be a better fellow.'

'Yes, indeed, my lord,' Musa answered, with downcast eyes.

'Good! Very good! I am sure you will try,' said Bimbashi Osman, incorrigibly hopeful. He cast a look of appeal at Gadein, who sat on his kit, staring stonily before

him. Bimbashi Osman sighed, shook Musa's hand a great many times, and hustled away.

Bash-shawish Mohammed Ahmed stood in the doorway, watching for the truck which would take them to railhead. When he saw it approaching, he ordered Musa, 'Take all the kit outside. Quickly!'

He strutted across to Gadein, tapped him on the shoulder with his stick, and pointed to the ground. He carefully placed his emma on a Bren chest, then bent and with his stick began to trace in the dust curves and curls and lines, rubbed them out, clicking his tongue in self-rebuke, and tried again. Gadein watched incuriously. There were curves like the breasts of girls or the soft outline of little hills. In the fold between them mushroom shapes appeared, like the huts of home. Deep in Gadein's mind a memory stirred, and he leaned forward. There was a grim smile on Mohammed Ahmed's lips as he wrestled with spreading horns, a head, hidders, a tail. Behind this beast marched a matchstick figure. Mohammed Ahmed pointed to his drawing, then to Gadein.

'Home,' he said quietly. 'You're going home.'

There was a light in Gadein's eyes, quickly dying with returned distrust.

'Go on, get in the truck,' said Mohammed Ahmed, propelling him gently. 'May God go with you.'

He watched them out of sight, and, turning, demonstrated to the sentry how a rifle is properly held at the slope.

★ ★ ★

'I can't help wondering what we may have done to these boys,' Bimbashi Maule said in the mess that night, forehead creased with anxiety.

Bimbashi Walters pulled up his trouser-leg and hunted for a flea.

'What you've got to worry about, cocky,' he said, 'is what they've done to us.'

XIV

IN CAIRO, MUSA WENT AFTER GIRLS, WAS ROBBED OF the seventeen pounds he had saved from his trading activities, and returned to transit camp in the morning escorted by two policemen. This was the last Gadein saw of him, kicking, biting and grimacing, shrieking as he was dragged to the guardroom, 'Whoremonger! Son of a bitch! Flicking Egyptian! Gadein, help me!'

But Gadein did not hear that, nor the hooting taxis, nor the train noises. Hope flickered, but he held himself humbly before the spirits.

In Buna they took his equipment from him, and gave him a shirt, a pair of shorts, some papers, and his hoe blades. He stored them carefully in a parcel of cloth, hands trembling, not yet daring to believe.

Then there was a train, and a battered lorry which broke down on the road. The driver attacked it with a pair of pliers, but nothing happened. He stood in the dusty road, scratching his head and swearing, while passengers made helpful remarks. Gadein sat dumbly in the back. Presently the driver came and mouthed at him, for there were Service Corps flashes on his shirt, but Gadein shook his head, wishing to forget. The driver, exasperated, hit the cylinder block with a hammer, and the lorry went.

Gadein climbed down in the desert, beside a faint track running towards wooded hills on the horizon. He put his

parcel on his head, and walked down the track. It became hot, and he took off his shirt. Dust gave way to stones, which slipped under his feet. He took off his sandals to give his toes free play.

A cloud covered the sun, a few splashes of rain fell, flopping on the stones like frogs, and he began to sing:

When the stork comes, pull the stubble,

Reach out with the hoe, and break the earth.

The earth is stubborn, my back is breaking like the earth,

But there will be plenty for harvest at the year's end.

He felt the song in his stomach and chest, and in his blood he knew that it would soon be seeding time. He stooped by the path, plucked three withered grasses, and as he walked towards the hills, plaited them in the way which sometimes averts evil.

Towards evening he came to an outpost village, where they were threshing the last of the old grain. He stood watching for a while, and when one of the men laid down his flail to rest, Gadein took it up and joined the workers. They nodded amiably at him, lips moving in the threshing song, and he too began to sing. He felt the song, and the thump-thump of the flails, pulsing through his body. The women came, baskets on heads, winnowed the grain, filled their baskets, and took them to the granaries. Gadein knew the sound of their voices, and smiled.

'Women make much chatter,' he said to his neighbour; and his neighbour's face split with easy laughter.

'They worked on until late in the cool, clear night. Gadein took cigarettes from his parcel, and offered them. They gathered round, questioning him. Gadein pointed to his ears, and said, 'I've been a soldier.' Their faces

fluckerred in sympathy, and they pulled him towards the fire where a goat was roasting.

The sheikh, dancing and singing, offered the goat's right hindleg to the spirits. A flock of egrets flew over, harbingers of spring, shimmering in the moonlight, and a great shout went up at this sign that the spirits had accepted their gift. Gadein did not know whether he heard the shout, or whether he guessed that they had shouted. He, too, cried with them, and felt the shout with his whole body.

Then three men danced the dance of the bashful wooer. One was a girl who was coy, another a girl who was too forthcoming. The third man was their lover, torn between them. The coy girl fled from him and he pursued her, but was tripped and wooed passionately by the forward girl. He fled from her, into the arms of the coy maiden, who took him gently but firmly into the bushes.

Gadein rocked with laughter. His white teeth showed in his wide mouth. He laughed so much that he rolled on the ground, helpless, drunk with laughter, a drunkard once reformed, but back to his cups of laughter at last.

'Tell us about being a soldier,' they shouted at him. 'Is it terrible?'

Gadein did not think it strange that he heard, though cloudily. The spirits had been appeased, and he was home.

'It wasn't bad,' he said thoughtfully. 'There's good food, and I've saved some bride-price. The English are very funny. We had an officer called Bimbashi Oakes. He walked like this.'

The roar of laughter intoxicated him anew. He walked like Bimbashi Courage, like Bimbashi Maule, like Bimbashi Walters. They clapped him on the back, roaring with laughter, and poured beer into his horn. The party

continued until dawn. Then they embraced him with the clasp of his own people, and he took the road for Laweyn.



Abu Butan was helping his three wives to clear a new patch of land in the plain beyond the cattle camp. He was able to undertake this because he had married Amna, a new wife who was young and hardworking, and because he had a rifle. The land was disputed territory between Laweyn and its neighbours. Abu Butan's part in its clearance was to strut rooster-like with his rifle, warning off all comers, and occasionally to thump one of the older wives when she seemed to want incentive.

He espied the approaching figure first, cocked his rifle, and moved cautiously behind a tree. The older wives tried to join him, but unfortunately it was a thin tree.

Presently he came out from behind the tree, and said with some irritation, 'It's Gadein!'

Gadein's mother, Howa, raised her head from the ground, like a hare poking from its form, and said, 'Thanks be to the spirits, he's safe!'

'Oh, he's safe,' Abu Butan said bitterly. 'You can't do anything to that fellow.' Then he recollected that the Spirit of the Whole World had told him Gadein would acquire great wealth. He called out hopefully, 'Hallo, Gadein. Welcome home.' He did not, however, move to meet his son. That would not have been fitting.

Gadein grinned nervously, quickening his pace. Not thus had he pictured his return home. There was to have been feasting, and he would drive up in a lorry amid a cloud of dust. When the feasters leapt in alarm, he would tread hard on the brake and stop, squealing. Abu Butan would rush to embrace him; Kattei and Tula, and the girls fight to massage his legs after the journey. Instead,

he saw that Abu Butan had put by the rifle and picked up his cudgel.

'Hallo, father,' he said shyly.

Abu Butan held out statuesque arms, and enfolded his son. He took the opportunity, while they kissed, to survey the parcel which Gadein had laid down. Howa, waiting behind her master, dabbed the boy's shoulder, and wept foolishly.

'Woman, there's work to be done!' exclaimed Abu Butan with a jocular flourish of his cudgel. He seated himself in the tree's shade and said, 'Women don't work as hard as they did. I hope you can keep them in order. Have you got your bride-price?'

'I have some of the bride-price,' Gadein said carefully. He would have liked to sit in the shade, too; but he remained standing.

Abu Butan looked his son slowly up and down.

'You've got good muscles,' he said with a certain foreboding. 'Can you shoot?'

Gadein hesitated. He was about to tell of Italians he had killed. He felt his father's eye upon him and said, 'No, father.'

'By God and by God and by God. What do they teach you in the army these days?'

'I drove a lorry.'

'You haven't saved your bride-price, and you can't shoot, but you can drive a lorry,' said Abu Butan. 'That will be very useful. What's in that parcel?'

'Some hoe blades, father. And they gave me some clothes.'

'Town-made hoe blades,' said Abu Butan. 'They don't last more than twenty years. Show me the clothes.'

Obediently, Gadein opened his parcel.

'Trash,' said Abu Butan, measuring himself against the

shirt. 'Stuff for soldiers. But I shall take charge of it.' It isn't fitting to have men running around with clothes on, as if they were chiefs. What's this?'

Gadein looked at the envelope. He remembered very long ago, in another world, Binibashi Courage had given it to him. But he had not opened it.

'I don't know, father.'

Abu Butan ripped at the paper with impatient fingers.

'My boy!' he cried, and began counting the notes. 'One five. And another. And a third. Four fives. Gadein, I'm proud of you. Amna, come here. Yes, you can come, too, Howa. You should be proud of your son. He has done well in spite of you. What a bride feast we shall have. There's the new grain just threshed, and some old for the beer, and Kattai shall take out the rifle. Are you sure you can't shoot? But never mind, you'll have other things to do. I'll kill five goats, ten goats. No, by God, I'll kill a bull. But you didn't save all that money. Tell me how you got it. Don't stand there dumb, you lunatic,' said Abu Butan with a return of querulousness.

'It was given to me,' said Gadein. 'I . . .'

Abu Butan stared at him incredulously. Then his elbow shot out and took Gadein sharply in the ribs.

'A silent tongue's a wise tongue,' he said. 'I'm glad they taught you that in the army.' He landed smartly with the left elbow, doubling up his son.



It was a great feast.

Gadein sat at his father's right hand, and was plied with gobbets of yellow fat.

'Kattai, Tula, pay attention to your brother,' Abu Butan said frequently, rapping them with his stick. 'He is very cunning, it is necessary to be cunning to get the better

of the English. He will be a big man. He is a friend of the spirits.'

When Abu Butan said this, Gadein's face took on the firm lines of manhood, for he always believed what his father said. After the feast he walked like Bimbashi Oakes, and Bimbashi Courage, and Bimbashi Maule, and Bimbashi Walters. He attempted a tentative portrait of Shawish Abdullahi. Everyone roared with laughter. This was all he wished to remember of the army.

Later, amid applause, he slipped away into the bushes with Kama.



And then it was springtime again, and they were clearing the home field together, beside the two huts which he had built and thatched.

'I feel the pain,' Kama said.

'Come home, then. Hurry.'

Gadein ran before her to douse the fire, and flung himself on the only angreb.

'Can you feel it?' he asked anxiously.

Kama groaned, and Gadein answered her, joy in his heart, groaning for dear life, so that even the deafest spirit might hear and look kindly upon the coming child.